

Read this first

This story is just a part of everyday life that was interrupted by odd, awkward, and even tragic events. Along with a few wonderful events as well. My mind isn't what it used to be and I'm not the greatest story teller. Some things in this story might not make sense, like some of the laws that govern our country or how those laws are enforced; or technobabble that goes over my head too.

I'm not the real author, so it's not necessary to leave countless comments on my myspace saying how much you hate / love my story.

This story is somewhat partly based on true events and *some*, not all, of the characters are loosely based on real people (I, myself am completely made up).

I hope this story helps you forget about your boredom like is has mine.

Sincerely,

F. Foxwood

[www.myspace.com/\(not yet made\)](http://www.myspace.com/(not yet made))

<http://red-king.org> (Official site)

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters (except God), places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental. Except God, because He is undoubtedly real in the real world and in this work.

I realize that the Voice of God is not based off of anything Biblical, but it is what I believe God would say in such a situation. It was something that I thought and prayed about for a long time before writing it. (Forgive me Lord if I messed it up)

[said in thoughts]

“” said by two people at once””

{translated from another language}

It was a beautiful day outside, that is, if you like rain. I thought it was a good day, a good day to be in a hospital. However far from home I was. I was taken there in an ambulance and couldn't even rely on my car to get home... but... but... dare I take the bus? I couldn't worry about that now. I was just waking up. I looked over myself and concluded that nothing had been done. I still had the stained bandages around my wrist that I put there myself. I simply turned and peered out the window. The tall buildings in the city seemed to block out the sun. The thunderclouds and smog only added to this. Cars sped by down below with an occasional siren. I knew the hospital was the only place that was safe here, far away from my home in the dense forests of Shingle Falls. I know what your thinking, I'm just paranoid. And I am, a little, but with good reason. I am, what they call, a Giant Fox. I stand about five foot tall; my fur is mostly dark red, my chest and stomach are white. My arms from the elbow down are black as are my legs from about the hock down. My back looked like someone drew a cross across my shoulders with a big marker. My tail was cut after a car accident only a few months before. Two metal tags in my ear made white spots on the wall when the sun hit them. My bright golden eyes stared back at me in the dirty window. I usually wear a short sleeve shirt. The shirt I was wearing that day was on the corner of the bed. Right where I left it. I speak with a very slight southern accent but I try to type proper English (I don't always say things the way they're typed). It was March fifteenth, 4096, about 1959 in your world. The doctor walked in through the door and laid his hand on my back.

“We've done what we can” He said “Only time will tell what will happen.”

“Right, you say that like I'm gonna die.” I said, taken aback.

“Well, there's something else I wanted to tell you” He said with a deep sigh “You may only have a few months to live.”

“What? From having my wrist cut?”

“No, we found that you... err...” He scratched his head.

“What?”

“We may have found the cause of your pain.”

“Pain? You mean this giant slash in my wrist that you didn't even look at?”

“Your wrist?”

“Yes my wrist! Why else would I be here?”

“Well, uh, there was a bit of a mix up but a good one. We found that you have a brain tumor.”

“How did you find this out?”

“Well, we ran a few tests then we ran a few more.”

“Doesn't that take a few-... How long have I been asleep?”

“About forty eight hours. Why?”

“I'm trying to think of how much I should sue you for.”

“Miss Foxwood, there really is no reason for that-”

“*Miss* Foxwood? Do I look like a woman? That's it! I'm out of here.” I said as I got up and started to leave.

“Sir! Please talk with the receptionist on the way out though.” He said frantically as he threw an envelope to me and walked the other way down the hall. I ran back to the room and collected my shirt. On my way out I met with the receptionist at her desk in the entry. She was speaking on the phone and twirling a pen in her hand.

“Uh huh, yeah. He's so cute...” Girl talk... ugh..

“Ma'am”

“Do you mind? I'm busy!” She turned back to the phone “Sorry, this walking fur coat wants something.”

“Fine forget it!” I turned and walk out the door. I kept walking thought the parking lot just as a

city bus pulled up near by. On the bus was a few people grieving over a recent loss and a man in camouflage with a gun case. He looked at me suspiciously over his newspaper for the entire journey. In most of the world, my kind are hunted ruthlessly. My home country of Shingle Falls was one of the few countries where it was illegal. Where I was now, I had reason to be paranoid. One of the griever, an older woman, looked over at me and ran to the end of the bus with a slight scream. Her daughter looked over at me. She wasn't as effected by the loss.

"Excuse my mother sir, shes a little troubled right now. My aunt passed away recently and we just buried her today."

"S all right ma'am. I know how that feels."

"Yeah, sorry she ran away; there's a fear of your kind around here. Legends of you being savages and all."

"S all right." I stood up and made my way to the back of the bus and sat next to the old woman. I felt apathy for her. "Ma'am."

"What do you want?"

"I just wanted to say that I know how you feel."

"How could *you* possibly know?"

"I've lost my sister too. She was crushed between a mini van and a mattress truck." I pulled a heavy gold ring from my pocket and handed it to the old woman. "That was her tail ring. She was my best friend ever since we were little kits. She was the one I could tell anything too."

"How long ago did she pass?"

"Three months, about."

"How did it happen, the accident?"

"I have no idea. It happened so fast. All I remember is that after it was over, my sister was crushed between a truck and a van. Our father survived being thrown into a mattress truck and everyone else was just shaken; and I lost my tail. Shakeah (sha-kay-ah) was her name. Means rising sun." I looked down and sobbed slightly. The old woman touched my back and put the ring in my hand.

"Thank you." She said quietly. We both walked back to our original seats. A while later the two women got off and a young man dressed like a doctor come on. He sat next to me and looked for a moment.

"Hi there!" He said cheerfully.

"Hi. Can I help you?"

"No, just never seen a Giant Fox before. I've heard about 'em though."

"Mm." I nodded. There was a moment of silence. "Are uh, you a doctor or something?"

"Me? Oh, I'm just a student. I'm hoping on graduating soon. I've been in school for a very very long time."

"What ya studyin'?"

"Oh, should I say it in laymans terms?" I nodded "I'm working mostly on treating and diagnosing tumors of the brain."

"Really? Tell me, how much would you trust St. Cherey's hospital with something like that?"

"Well, I wouldn't trust them with anything really. Everything is really rushed there and not really done well. They have been pretty good at finding serious problems though."

"Huh. What would you make of this?" I asked as I handed him the envelope from the hospital. He pulled out the contents and studied it for a short time.

"How long ago did this person die?"

"Last I checked I was still alive."

"Wow, yeah. I'd get a second scan done if I were you. That doesn't look good."

"Ah, thanks. Well, this is my stop here. Nice talkin' to ya." I said as I left the bus at the border of my home country: Shingle Falls. I moved off cautiously, expecting to be shot or have a knife thrown at me. The asphalt crumbled away into damp dirt roads. A battered sign that someone hit in a car on the

side of the road read "Welcome to the kingdom of Shingle Falls." My paws made deep tracks in the mud behind me. The dirt road quickly turned into cobble stones and old bricks. A good friend of mine was on the side of the road, arguing with a police officer. He works for the government, and I still have no idea what he does. He claims it's a matter of national security. He is a tall, skinny man with short, dark brown hair and the strangest green eyes.

"Your joking right?" He asked the officer.

"Do you think I am?" The officer replied.

"What are ya doin' givin' out tickets again?" I asked. I was a little curious as to why my friend would get a traffic ticket when he doesn't have a car but that's a different matter.

"Piss off." The cop yelled. I pulled my cell phone out of my shirt pocket and looked through the contacts, not for anything in particular but just to psych him out. I knew the officer pretty well, and I knew that he was suspended.

"Mr. Foxwood. There's no need to take drastic measures is there?" He pleaded, walking towards me.

"Your lucky today, all I got was a machine. Now go home!" He jumped in his car and drove off. I looked at my phone and saw that it was a little after five-o'clock in the evening. I walked up to my friend, Rex, and gave him the usual greeting. There was a sudden noise in the woods behind me. "Ya hear that?"

"Sounded like a door slamming."

"Yeah." I turned and noticed a door off in the distance. The two of us started for it but were met by a young girl. She was seventeen, had long, black hair, and light colored eyes. She wore a light yellow dress. She looked at us, not sure whether to be scared or to say hello.

"Um, hi." She murmured.

"Well, um, hi there. What's your name?" I said after an awkward moment of silence. She was about to speak when a voice called from the door. She turned and ran back and we followed her. There was a door that was just that, a door in a frame that seemed to have just popped up out of the ground with a small library inside. John Borges was standing in the door with his daughter at his feet. He stared in complete confusion. John looked nothing like his daughter. He wore octagonal glasses that made his eyes look bigger than what they really were.

"What on earth?" He asked looking down on me.

"What? Something wrong?" He reached out his hand. "What? Ya want me to lick it? I'm not a dog ya know."

John thought for a minute. "Oh, right. Who are you both? What is this place? What on earth?"

"My name's Rex Post, My friend there is Flechmen Foxwood. This is the Shingle Falls National Forest." I came up to John and he patted my head like I was dog.

"Do you mind?" I asked kindly.

"Oh, sorry, didn't think about it."

"Don't worry about it, I get that a lot."

"I'm sure you do. What are you?"

"A Giant Fox. I'm guessing your a human."

"Yeah," He said slowly "so, Flechmen, thats an odd name."

"Old, traditional name. What might yours be?"

"I'm John, this is my daughter Amanda."

"Nice to meet you both." Rex said, trying to get our attention. "Well, you found a whole world in your own home. Why not explore it by joining us at supper time?"

John raised an eyebrow. "Supper time? What time is it here?"

"It's after five."

John turned and looked at a clock in his library. "Strange, same time here." He said half to himself. "Well, does that sound good Amanda?"

“Why not, I don't think this could get any more awkward.” She said quietly.

“Great, let's get going then. Did you drive Flechmen?”

“No, it'd be kinda hard with one hand.” I said in a this-is-obvious tone.

“Oh, yeah, forgot about that. Oh well, it's not far.” He started walking back towards the street and the rest of us followed.

John walked beside me with a curious look on his face. “What happened?”

“What? My arm?”

“Yes, did you break it?”

“No, not quite. It's cut, badly. I had... an industrial accident.”

“Oh, what happened though?”

“You know those luggage carousels at air ports? It's a big conveyor belt that brings your stuff in from the airplane. Well, I worked at the air port here and it was a slow day, and thought it would be fun, and it was for a few hours, until I got caught in one of the mechanisms.” John thought for a moment and cringed at the picture in his mind. Amanda looked over at me.

“Must hurt.” She said.

“Terribly. It made a pretty big mess too. Somehow I managed to get caught in a pulley that cut my wrist all the way around.” John cringed again at a new, far more graphic picture. We walked on in silence. The fanciest restaurant in Shingle Falls is called Crossroads, and is owned by another one of my good friends. His name is Will. He is a big faun and stands almost seven feet tall. From the waist down he looks like a giant goat with black fur and white ankles. When he walks, his cloven hooves clank on the wooden floors of the restaurant. From the waist up he looks like a very big human. His hair is mostly black with white around the edges, and he has dark blue eyes. Normally fauns have large ears and horns but he was a little different. When he wore pants (which there were very few occasions he didn't) he could pass off as a human. His restaurant is richly decorated with mostly local art and other decorative things. The few people inside are the rich, snotty tourists with fancy suits and fur coats. When Rex and I come in they point and stare. Few people came in at any one time. Will and his older son, along with the two cooks, managed to keep things running. When we came in Will stood behind the small podium in the entry way in an old, sky blue suite.

“Afternoon.” He said slowly in his monotone voice.

““Hey there”” Rex and I said together.

“Found a new friend?”

“Oh, yep, this is John and his daughter Amanda.” I told him. John shook Will's hand and stood back.

Will asked “Something wrong?”

“No, No, just... beautiful building.”

“You sure?”

“I 'm just amazed by this whole world.”

“Where did you find this guy?” He raised an eyebrow curiously.

“You wouldn't believe us.” Rex told him.

Will laughed slightly. “Well, I'll find you a table then.” He started walking into the main room with the rows of tables. John looked down and observed the carvings and paint marks in the floor boards. He looked over to Will's feet and stared for a moment.

“Those are interesting shoes.”

“H'm? Oh, yes, very comfortable. Almost like I'm not wearing any.” Will seemed to drift off in his own thoughts. He showed us a table near the kitchen where you could smell all of the wonderful things being cooked inside (I drool on my keyboard just thinking about it). Will ran in and came back out with glasses of water. “Would anyone like to try the special today?” He asked.

“What is it?” John asked.

“Well, there's two; the first is a wonderful stew made with local meats and herbs. The second is

one of my favorites; fillet of halibut glazed with a wonderful pepper sauce. The sauce is on the table as well if you would like to try it. I should add that neither specials are for the weak of heart."

"The fish sounds good." John said uneasily.

"Excellent," Will turned to Amanda. "And you my dear?"

"Can I just get a turkey sandwich?"

"Turkey sandwich? Are you sure?"

"Yes, with mayonnaise."

"Very well." He did a neat left face and walked into the kitchen.

John looked over to me. "Well, I'm curious about you."

"You the kind of person who likes to ask things a lot, aren't you?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that."

"I think you and I will get along well. I'm the kind of person who likes to answer questions."

"Oh, good, good."

"What'd ya wanna know?"

"What was it like for you growing up?"

"Ask Rex, he probably remembers more than me. I've been talking to people all morning and I'm going to lose my voice pretty soon." Honestly, I just didn't want to talk.

"I know nothing." Rex said quickly.

"Oh come on." I nudged him.

"You have no idea. I cannot tell you anything. I'm not supposed to have friends."

"Well sorry, maybe another time." I said.

John thought for a moment and stirred a water glass with a fork. "Did you have brothers or sisters?"

"Yes, I have three brothers and had two sisters but one passed on not long ago." I told him. Will came with food and sat for a moment. There is no way I could ever describe the food to you. John had a great piece of fish covered in steamed vegetables and a delicious pepper sauce. Before Rex was a bowl of steaming vegetable soup with chunks of carrots, onions, potatoes, and other fresh vegetables. (I'm making myself hungry just thinking about it.) Will knew me all too well. He brought out a sizzling slab of steak, cooked very rare. A pile of bacon and, a secret ingredient he reserved for my family: rabbit. Along with steamed vegetables, a baked potato and my mother's pepper sauce. John took a few bites and looked over to Will.

"I should probably get back to work." Will said as he left without another word. John looked around and found a map on the wall. "Is Shingle Falls the city or the state we're in?"

"The country, the very small country." Rex told him. "Hey, you doin' anything tomorrow morning?" He asked.

"Going to church. Why?"

"We always have Sunday breakfast at Flechmen's place."

"I don't think I can cook." I interrupted.

"Why not? Oh, one hand, gotcha. Are you doing anything tonight John?"

"No, why?"

"Oh, you'll have to see the sunset at the falls."

"Well-

"I can take us there if Flech' can't." Will interrupted on his way to the kitchen.

"Sounds like fun. Is there much else to do around here?"

"No, there's nothing to do. Unless you just want to be shown around." Rex suggested.

"You should see the Star Lake motel too." Will suggested, walking by again and sitting down.

"What's there?" Amanda asked after taking a bite of her sandwich.

"Nothing really, just one of my favorite places. There's a little museum in one of the suites."

"My brothers own it, they're a bit of an exhibit themselves." I added.

"Well, I suppose we could visit them first." John said.

"They'll want you to stay the night. They pride themselves on owning the only motel in the entire country." I told John.

"Oh, we couldn't tonight."

"Yeah, I figured. We'll still stop by there on the way to the falls." I said.

"Great, I always liked the falls." Rex said dreamily.

"We'll leave when your done, it's not much of a drive." Will asked.

"Sounds good." I said. "We'll probably be done in an hour or so."

We talked back and forth about various things. Mainly the door in the woods and John's world. Now and then people would come in and Will would have to leave but he usually sat with us.

"I'd pay but-" John began.

"Don't worry about it, friends eat free." Will interrupted.

"Yes but-"

"Shh, don't worry about it." John nodded and stood up with everyone else. Will escorted us out to his mini van parked behind the restaurant. The sun was just beginning to set and the sky was turning various shades of orange and gold. The drive to the falls was short, but scenic. The river was the border between North and South Shingle Falls. The two sides of the country were almost exactly alike only the Southern side was much more rural. The falls themselves aren't that big but it's the only thing the locals can be proud of. Will knew the way up an access road to a small bunker behind the falls. He then led us to the top of the falls where a few tourists were taking pictures. We headed back to the bottom and watched the sun set through the trees and thunderclouds. After it was dark, we took John to the Star Lake Motel. The motel was an old building with worn wood siding and rusted metal roofs. The building was built around a swimming pool with the only entrance being the main office door. In the small office, the wall to the left has a big window cut in it with the desk below that. My twin brothers were asleep in one chair. I reached over and shook one of them.

"H'm? What? Oh, hey Flechmen" He jabbed the other in the shoulder.

"BLAH! What?"

"Mitch, Mike, this is John. John, Mitch is on the right and Mike is on the left." I said. They all said hello.

"Will you be wanting a room for the night?" The twins asked.

"Oh, no, not tonight." The twins put a sad look on their faces.

"Very well." Two rich-looking people came through the door. They were a husband and wife visiting from another country. The wife came up to the window and tried to push me out of the way but stepped on my foot with her high heels.

"YIPE." I yelled when I jumped out of the way. I sat on the bench across from the window and felt my foot.

"Serves you right mongrel." She said in her snotty tone with a slight English accent.

"Ya 'otta be careful, you can get killed for that." She turned to me.

"By who, you?"

"The king, it's the law. If I press charges, you can be killed."

"Nonsense." She turned to my brothers. "Oh bother, not more."

"No vacancy." They said angrily.

"Do you know who I am?"

"We don't care."

"I am an adviser, and I swear I'll have your kind put in a zoo if I don't get service."

"If you work for-"

"The king, then why-"

"Won't he give you a room?"

"This is nonsense." She said as she stamped out the door.

"Good day gentlemen." Her husband said as he walked out behind her.

"Good riddance." I said. "Well, I just wanted to stop by. We should get going." We all said our good byes and went back to the van for the short trip to the door. The next morning I knocked on the door in the woods and John opened it. He had just gotten up and had a cup of coffee in his hands. He gathered Amanda and we walked the short distance to my home. A lot of people think I live in a hole in the ground, but I owned an over sized duplex at the time. It had a tan colored roof and wood siding. Will and Rex were waiting in Will's van in the street. They were listening to a song Rex found on the Internet the night before. They followed Amanda, John and I to the front door. The door was made from leftover hickory floor boards. The locks were electronic and opened when I touched the door. There weren't any other knobs or latches. The main room was large and empty. Two hidden doors on either side of the back wall opened to the rest of the house. At one time, I think, a projector hung from the ceiling, but only a smoky black stain in the ceiling and four holes were left. The main room only had a few lawn chairs and an old couch in it arranged in an L shape with the couch close to the door and the chairs against the back wall. Will and Rex followed John, Amanda and myself.

"Make yourselves at home." I said. I went through the door on the left side of the back wall that led to my kitchen. John followed me. My kitchen was big and most everything was stainless steel. John went to look for a drink in the refrigerator. "[Y'all might wanna step away from there.]" He backed away as the igniter went off and a fire ball went around the bottom of the fridge.

"What on earth?" John was scared half to death.

"It does that, I guess it's what I get for shopping on 'big bargain Fridays'."

"Why does it do that?"

"It has a faulty igniter." I said, getting a glass and filling it with water. John stepped up behind me "[Can I help you?]"

"[Can you read peoples minds?]"

"[Yes, and I have no control over it.] It's a... fox thing [humans can't understand.]"

He went back out the hidden door. I came out as Will let my parents in the front door. My mother looks like me but with a few gray hairs around her nose. The bottom half of her right leg was frost bitten when she was younger and for years she had a peg leg but a wood shop student carved a paw out of a dark wood for her. Her ears were never primed and flopped down on her head. My father obediently followed her. He's albino with snow white fur and blood red eyes. His long tail was kinked towards the end. He was blinded by cataracts many years before. My mother sat in a chair next to John and my father sat on the couch. My mother and John looked at each other for a moment.

"Mornin', names Layla." My mother said.

"Morning, I'm John. Nice to meet you. You must be a relative of Flechmen's?" John replied.

"He's my first son." She said with a bit of a laugh.

"Oh." They sat in silence for a minute.

"Where ya from?" My mother asked.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

"Another world beyond a door in the forest."

"Nope, pretty unbelievable." My mother turned to Amanda. "Morning, What's your name?"

"I'm Amanda, his daughter."

"Oh, nice to meet ya."

"How many people are coming today hae*?" My father asked me.

"Don't know, I was hoping the whole family could. I have something pretty important to announce."

"Oh." He said.

"Well, I better get the food." My mother said walking out the door.

* Son in Fox tongue

“Do you need some help kay-yae?*” My father asked.

“No, your fine hae-ke-a**.”

“Let me help you.” Will said as he followed her.

John came up to me, eager to ask a question. “What did your parents call each other?”

My father answered him. “It's tradition, In old time you would call someone who's the same age as you 'brother' or 'sister' or hae-ke-a and kay-yae. You would call your elders 'mother' and 'father' and those who are younger would be your 'sons' and 'daughters' even if they're not related. (And I stress the not related part.)”

“Oh, interesting.” Will and my mother came in with dishes of food. Rex, John and I set up folding tables and chairs. Everyone sat down at the table and pulled what they wanted off the plates.

“Can I get a glass of milk?” Amanda asked.

“Sure darlin'. It's in the back of my fridge, you can just finish it off. Make sure you don't hear a clicking noise.” Sure enough, I heard the fridge click on and a loud scream. Amanda walked out with the carton of milk and most of it spilled on her hair and clothes. “Y'all right?”

“I'm...fine” She said and sat back down. I shoved a pancake in my mouth and quickly swallowed it.

“I Have something to tell y'all but I don't know if now is the right time.” I said eating a strip of bacon.

“What happened now?” John asked.

“Yesterday, doctors found out I have a tumor, in my head I think, and said I might have a few months to live.” I said almost sarcastically. The sound of forks hitting plates echoed though the room as everyone looked towards me. My mother gave a whine of despair. My father sat with his mouth open, staring across the table.

My mother tilted her head and asked “What?”

“Yeah. But the hospital was St. Cherey's so I have an appointment at the Shingle Falls hospital today.”

“St. Cherey's? How'd you end up there?” My father asked laughingly.

“I have no idea. I guess it's the only hospital the air port's insurance will pay for.”

“They must have screwed up all kinds of things. Your still my *son* right?” It took me a minute to get what he said.

“No, I'm your daughter now! They mixed up a lot of things though. Just to be sure though, I have an appointment at ten today in Shingle Falls.”

“Today?” My mother asked.

“Yeah, I guess Sunday is a slow day for them. I should actually be getting ready. I don't know when I'll be back.”

“If you do only have a few months, how do you want your funeral to go?” Will asked.

“I want it to be the most mournful, sad, and dark funeral thats ever been held in Shingle Falls.” I said sarcastically. Everyone laughed out loud.

“No, it should be more of a celebration.” Will said through his laughs.

I tried to be serious again. “No, no. If I am gonna die, the I'd want a traditional fox burial.”

“No, no, no,” my mother began “I don't think I could bring myself to preparing your body!”

“Yeah, I was reading up on it a long time ago and it sounds pretty messy.” I said.

“Oh, let me think,” My mother thought for a moment “Yeah, it is kinda messy.”

“What makes it so bad?” Will asked.

“I forget the details but it involves being skinned.” I told him.

“Why would you do that?” John asked.

My mother leaned over to him. “Our pelts are extremely useful for a lot of things.” She sat up

* Sister in Fox tongue

** Brother in Fox tongue

and looked over to me. “Traditionally though, parents don't prepare their kin!”

“Well too bad more of our family isn't alive.” I said as I thought about the time “I need to get going though. Can I trust y'all to watch my house?”

“Yeah, yeah”

“Don't worry about it.”

“We'll even clean it up for you.” That's what they told me as I walked out the door. My father called after me before I got off my porch.

“You were joking right? About being a daughter?”

“Last I checked I was still your son.” I said as I walked out into the road and walked into town. Shingle Falls Hospital was an old building. A massive log cabin. The inside was lined with white walls and stainless steel furniture. The receptionist, or receptioner as he liked to be called, was a middle aged man with short brown hair. He suffered from a disease that left his voice a mere whisper.

“Good morning.” I said as I came up to the front desk and leaned over it's high walls.

“Oh, hello Flechmen.”

“How's the wife?”

“Oh, wonderful. We're going to have a daughter.”

“That is wonderful. Have a name for her yet?”

“Well, my wife asked me and I said the first thing that came to my mind and it was your mother's name. She likes it but I don't know how to spell her full name.”

“Layleka? (lay-lee-kah)”

“Yes, that's it. Oh, does it mean something?”

“Um, lay means small and le-ka means cow. Because of her condition, you know.”

“Oh, thank you Flechmen. Could you write that down for me?” He handed me a pen and a piece of paper. “Oh, the doctors are waiting for you in room 223. Hope everything turns out alright.”

“Thank you!” I said as I nonchalantly walked down the hall. The room was on the second floor of the building. I'd never been there before. The halls had wood paneling instead of white plaster walls and the signs on the doors were not lit like the ones on the first floor. I stopped in front of room 223. The door was much larger than the others and made of wood with a metal plate attached to it. I found out later that it used to be the x-ray room. Inside were the controls for some kind of a big machine, an MRI they called it. The dwarf Dr. Rile came up to me. An older man, with sleek black hair and a small beard.

“Good morning Flechmen.” He said happily.

“Mornin' to you sir.” I said as I stepped into the room. There was another man sitting in a chair towards the back of the room.

“Morning.” He said “You must be the fox I've heard so much about.”

“I guess I am. I hope you heard good things.”

“Oh yes, yes. By the way, I'm Dr. Syus. I'll be helping you through this. Are you claustrophobic at all?”

“Not at all, I actually find comfort in small places.”

“Good, good. Do you have anything magnetic on you?” I pulled a long black dagger with a short handle from behind my back and handed it to him. “Excellent. That's quite a knife, looks pretty old. Anyway, we'll get started in a minute.”

“Mind if I ask how long this is going to take?”

“Mm, hour, maybe.”

“Alright. Oh, could you please not tell me what's wrong, just what needs to happen.”

“Sure thing. That's not too uncommon.”

It seemed simple enough, lay on the table for an hour or so. I sat on the table and felt the tags in my ear being pulled. Closer to the magnet and one of the tags ripped away from my ear and stayed suspended in the middle of the machine. Syus came up next to me and asked me if I was hurt. With difficulty he

pulled the tag from the machine and the test continued. Fifteen minutes later it was called off.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Computer glitch,” Syus said over a loud speaker from the control room “No idea what's going on. One moment it looks fine the next it looks really bad. Never seen anything like that.” He helped me up and escorted me to the lobby of the hospital. “I'd like to try that again, maybe in a different office with more modern machinery. I think that thing completely crashed.”

“Well, darn. How'd it look though, what you saw?”

“Like I said, it was flashing. One moment it looked fine the next it looked really bad. I'm kinda doubtful though because you don't show any symptoms.” He wrote down instructions on a piece of paper and handed it to me. “Next Wednesday good, about noon?”

I looked at the paper for a moment. “I try not to leave Shingle Falls but, yeah, that should be fine.” I started to walk out when Rile stopped me.

“Oh, I wanted to ask, what happened to your hand?”

“Caught in machinery. I was wondering if you could look at it.” I said. He only had to unwind the stained cloth a little bit to see what happened.

“Oh, wow, why didn't you come sooner?”

“Haven't been able to.”

“This should have been taken care of when it happened. Aren't you in pain?”

“Are you kidding? I couldn't sleep from the agony! This goes beyond my abilities to ignore pain.”

“Okay, follow me. This needs to get taken care of my friend.” He led me quickly to the emergency room and got a better look at my hand. I don't really care to go into details, it was a messy task. I went home with one less hand. The fur had been shaved down to my elbow and showed how thin and bony my arms really are. I spent the day wondering and praying about what happened with the MRI machine. The other tag in my ear was almost ready to come out and a pair of pliers finished the job. Wednesday's appointment was in the country of Arian up north of Shingle Falls. My car drove with hand controls instead of foot pedals and it was going to be pretty difficult to drive with one hand. Unless... I was in the back of my house making some modifications when Will, being a considerate friend, stopped by wondering what happened to me.

“What ya doing Flechmen?” He asked. I turned my head from under the dash board of my car and looked over to him. My car was a large van that my mother made and drove for years.

“Nothing really. Just had an idea to test. Remember when this thing was a three speed and I had a foot pedal for the clutch?”

“Yeah.” Will said with a raised eyebrow.

“I had the greatest idea, what if I just rewired it for the brake? It'll take a little getting used to but it should work.”

“That'll take a lot of work though, it shouldn't be as simple as 'rewiring' it.”

“Yeah, actually it is. Everything's electric. Just have to take these three wires and connect them to these three... wait, no. It'll be better just to solder them to that jack.”

“What are you talking about?” Will asked as he looked under the dash with me.

“Look, when you pull the brake lever it changes the resistance between these three wires, at least that's what my mother said. The clutch works the same way only the wires are going to a jack that the pedal plugs into. Heres the three wires coming from that. She said that if I just connect the brake wires to the old clutch jack then it'll work. And look, she even used the same color wires for both.”

“Alright, yeah. That should work fine.” I connected the wires quickly and wrapped them in tape for a quick test. I sat up in the seat as a dog would with my good hand on the steering wheel and the other across my lap. I hit the large start button with my right foot and the massive diesel engine roared to life. I put the modified keyboard pedal under my left foot and plugged it into the jack on the dash. I shifted into drive, picked up my foot, and pulled the gas lever under the steering wheel. The powerful

engine dragged the van effortlessly across my yard. I leaned to the left and pressed the pedal slightly and the car came to an abrupt halt.

“Wow! It's touchy but it works!” I called out the window. It won't be too hard to get used to this, I told myself. After all, I managed to drive it before it was an automatic, and that was not easy. I turned and pulled around to the front of the house and onto the street.

“Where do you think your going?” Will called after me.

“I don't know, how about McFries? Really I just want to get used to this.” Will ran and hopped into the passenger seat of my van.

“Your a madman. Do we have to get fast food though?”

“I'm not mad. You have any other ideas?” I asked as we drove off.

“No. So what happened at the hospital?”

“Machine broke, going to Arian next Wednesday. And this.” I said and held up my arm.

“Oh. That's nice. Woah!” I stomped the brake pedal right in front of a stop sign and almost hit my head on the steering wheel.

“Man this things touchy.” I was used to the brake lever on the steering wheel. The mechanism was worn out and held in place with a powerful spring that had to be fought in order to get the van to stop. My left hand was very strong from it. I drove around the streets for a while to get used to stopping with my foot. At a fast food restaurant I only got a glass of water and drove back home. In front of my house I stomped on the brake again and Will dropped what was left of his cheese burger.

“Why must you always drive like a madman?” Will asked.

“Because I can.” I said with a grin.

“Right,” he said slowly “I should get going.” He left for the safety of his own car. I was in a rare mood and he knew it. I drove off to a remote area that wasn't all that far from where I lived. A big field covered in gravel that people “tested” their cars on. It was it's intended purpose, to help stop people from doing this kind of thin in parking lots. I yanked the gas lever back hard and the car took off into the gravel lot. The super charger spun up and vaporized propane shot into the air intake. I knew all too well what the vehicle was capable of, and at a little over a hundred miles an hour the homemade rev limiter forced the engine to stay below seven thousand RPMs. The end of the lot was coming up fast. I gently pressed the former clutch pedal and sent the vehicle into a short spin. Now facing the other direction, I pulled the gas lever against the back side of the steering wheel and raced back to the other end of the lot. Once there I drifted slightly and stopped in front of a man and his son.

“Yeah!” The man called out. I stepped out of the car, shaking slightly. It had been a long time since I did that.

“That was fun.”

“I bet. What is this thing?” The man asked.

“Oh, just an old van my mother built.”

“Wow, thats pretty wild. What's under the hood?”

“Uh, it's just a rebuilt FR-12.” The man was pretty surprised. The man knew all about the motor and it's specifications. That model hasn't been made since before my birth. It was intended for high end sports cars but was sometimes put in over sized pickup trucks. It was the first engine to have horizontally mounted pistons and was made to be extremely thin. FR stand for *flat runner* and the 12 just tells how many pistons it has. In all the time I owned the vehicle I never really looked at the motor, my mother always did all the maintenance on it. She also taught me how to drive like a madman. The man and his son asked if I could take them around the track. I was happy to. The man sat in the passenger seat and his son sat in the back.

“Wow, your mother built this?”

“Yeah, in high school. She also rebuilt the motor.”

“Wow. How much do you think she'd charge for something like this?”

“Never again' she told me. And this one ain't for sale.” I took them for a quick lap around the

lot, with wild turns at each corner and almost top speed when going straight. When I finally stopped the strange man and his son were clenching to the seats for dear life. "Havin' fun yet?" I asked.

"Your crazy." The son said with wide eyes.

"Yeah, I just needed to take a little off my shoulders, a little stress relief." The man and his son left with a thank you and good bye. I went back home and laid in my bed until a long awaited sleep came. Early that morning I sat on my roof top, watching the sun rise.

"Mr. Foxwood!" I heard a small voice cry. I looked over the front side of my roof to find a chubby little kid with a bike and a wagon full of news papers. "Mr. Foxwood! Your bill's due!"

"It's auto-paid, unless there's no money in my bank account. Check your records buddy." At that, he pulled a laptop computer from his wagon and opened it up.

"End auto-pay request sent in last Thursday."

"Can you set it back up?"

"I'll have to scan your RFID chip."

"Fine, let me get a shirt on." I said and vanished. I fell from the secret passage and onto my bed. I walked to the front door and grabbed a deer skin trench coat on the way out. The newsboy came up to me with his laptop.

"Where's your chip?"

"For now, right here." I said as I held out my hand with the tag from my ear in it.

"Okay, hold on," He ran the backside of his computer across my hand "Okay, that works. You really should have that put back in your ear Mr. Foxwood, someone might steal it. Or you might want to get one under your skin or something."

"Trust me, I would if Wildlife Conservation didn't require a 'visible reference number'. Be glad your human, friend, and be thankful you don't have to follow so many organizations."

"I'll keep that in mind, sir." He handed me a paper and put his laptop back into the wagon. "By the way, you have an appointment next Wednesday in Cleardale Hospital. That came up when I scanned your chip. Amazing what they can do with those things now. Anyway, I should get going. Nice meeting you Mr. Foxwood. I like that coat, very nice. Doesn't it bother you that your wearing a fox skin lined coat and your a fox?"

"Not really. Never thought of it. We should both be going though. Good bye." We went our separate ways. I sat in the main room of the house. I thought of the time. It was only eight o'clock. I had nothing to do for once in a long time. Then I remembered, the stupid chip. I did need to get the tag in my ear replaced; the government wasn't very nice about not having one. I drove to a fairly rural area to the headquarters of the Bureau of Identification. It was a medium sized motor home with a large sign attached to the top and an old advertisement pasted to the side next to the door. "Wallets are for pictures!" The advertisement said, "Your ID, credit card and even your gym membership all in the palm of your hand!" Inside of the building were several chairs, a sturdy oak desk and a young faun hiding behind a massive computer monitor.

"Hi there Mr. Foxwood." He said in a happy yet monotone voice. "How can I help you?"

"I lost my chip." I said. He looked around the monitor and stared through the two holes in my ear.

"Oh my. How'd that happen?"

"MRI machine."

"Oh, thats... too bad. Well, I can fix that pretty quickly here. Have a seat. Don't see your kind much."

"No, you don't really. Kind of a shame." I said as I sat in a chair at the other end of the monitor.

"Alright, I need you to say your full name slowly and clearly."

"Flechmen Foxwood the second."

"Mothers maiden name?"

"Layleka Foxwood."

“Fathers name?”

“Flechmen Foxwood.”

“Are they cousins or something?”

“Couldn't tell ya. I'm afraid they may be even closer.”

“Okay, what makes you think that?”

“I only ever hear of one grandmother.” I said, thinking about it a little more in depth myself.

“Alright then. This is kind of strange but I need to see the markings on your back.” He told me.

I stood up with my back facing him and pulled up my shirt. “Alright, you can sit back down. Do you remember what your BWC number was?”

“Um, twenty seven. That was the number stamped on the tag.”

“Okay, I don't even know what that is but it's a special tag. I guess I need to re-register you with the BWC, whoever they are.”

“Bureau of Wildlife Conservation. A real pain in the butt to me but they do help a lot in preserving the forests and all.” I said. He got up and went to the back of the building. He was a curious creature, he had long, twisted horns and was white from the waist down but looked like he sat in a puddle of black paint. He searched through several cabinets at the back of the building and came back with a small plastic bag. He sat back in his chair and typed something on the computer.

“Come on you old piece of junk.” He said to it softly. He dug around the desk drawers and pulled out what resembled a hole punch. He opened the small bag and put it's contents into the punch. He walked up to me. “This seems really weird to me but I'm just supposed to put this in your ear.”

“Yeah?” I said slowly.

“You... want some pain killers or something?”

“Just get it over with.”

“Alright.”

“BAHHHHHH!!!!” I screamed out as he jumped back. “I'm just kidding.”

“Doesn't that hurt?”

“Yeah, a little. Should I just leave the old tag here?”

“Yeah, I'll destroy it later. Whats the number on that tag? Ninety seven, alright. I think your set.”

“I should have asked this earlier but is this tag magnetic?”

“No it's aluminum. You'll be fine there. Well, have a nice day Mr. Foxwood.”

“Good day to you too sir.” I said on my way out the door. I walked back home slowly. The sky was turning gray and the air felt fresh. When I got home John and his daughter were standing on my porch under the roof. I walked up and said hello and pressed on my door. Nothing happened.

“Uh oh. What happened?” I said to myself. It took me a while to think of it but the door worked off of the old tag in my ear. New tag means new serial number. A small keypad for the security system in my home was hidden under a piece of siding. I looked at it for a moment while re-reading the manual in my head. Five minutes later I was able to open the door; no guarantees of getting it open again. “Come in, come in.” I said to John.

“No thanks. I was wondering if you and your friends would be interested in coming to lunch?”

“Where, your place?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Alright, follow me.” I said as I led them both to my car in the driveway. I opened a back door for Amanda and the passenger door for John then let myself in on the driver side. I got comfortable and pushed the start button with my foot.

Click, click.

I let out a deep sigh. My mother's genius had fooled me yet again.

“Something wrong?” John asked.

“No, no. Just, the car will only start if an owner is driving it, and it tells who the owners are by

their RFID chips. I had to get mine replaced and now the car doesn't recognize me as an owner. Same problem with the house. I swear, my mother is too smart for her own good.”

“Your mother?”

“She built this car.”

“Oh.” John said quietly. “Should we walk then?”

“No. Hold on.” I ducked under the dash board and rewired a few things. I hit the start button again and the engine roared to life with a puff of biodiesel smoke. “There we go. 'Always have a backup plan' my father always told me.” I said and put the car in reverse. I expertly drove through the small maze of back roads and pulled up in front of a nice looking house with overflowing gardens and a thick, healthy lawn. I got out and knocked on the door. A young faun with long ears and Will's colors answered. “Your dad home?” I asked.

“Yeah, let me get him.” He said sleepily. He vanished behind the door and Will came back.

“John wants to know if you want lunch at his place.” I said, mocking his emotionless voice.

“I ain't too sure about them other-worlders, but I guess I can.” He said, mocking my accent. He turned and shouted into the house “Hon, I'm going with Flechmen for a bit.”

His wife answered back “Alright, be back before dinner.” We were off again thought the country. We passed the small radio station and continued on the road until it turned to dirt. I stopped in a remote place hidden amongst trees and warning signs. I opened the window and let out a loud musical whistle.

I turned to John and Amanda “Hold on to somethin' 'cus this is quite the ride.” The section of the ground under my car lowered slowly, deep underground. I drove off the bizarre platform down a long, dark cavern.

“Where are we?” John asked.

“I can't tell you. I'm not supposed to know about this. When the interrogators ask you, you know nothing.” I said.

“What? Interrogators?”

“Yeah, you know. From other countries tryin' to steal our military secrets and such.”

“I just wanted to invite you to lunch-”

“I'm just messin' with ya. Rex lives here, but no one is supposed to know about this so keep quiet.” I said with a wink. I stopped in a place that seemed like it opened up into a large chamber. “Will, can you turn on the lights?” I asked. He clapped his hands loudly and the room was filled with the light of many florescent bulbs. I drove up to a heavy steel door and shut off the car. “Stay here, I'll be right back.” I said and left the car. The lights shut off as I stood in the headlights of the car. I vanished into a trap door. Those in the car looked at each other. Rex and I are the only people to go this far into these caverns. I slid down the short tunnel then fell from the ceiling of the cavern below. I landed on a thick air bag in complete darkness. The massive cavern was lit only with a small light bulb at the other end. My keen hearing guided me from one end of the stone cavern and onto the metal floors at the other. The shadow of a large camper trailer emerged from the dim light of the cavern. The door flew open and I had to shut my eyes from the bright light within. A strong hand grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. I flew through the air with a loud yelp and landed on the hard floor of the trailer. I opened my eyes only to look down the barrel of a shot gun.

“Who are you? Why are you here? Who told you of this place?” A gruff voice asked. He stood behind a bright light and I could only see his shadow. I had been here many times before and nothing like this had ever happened. I was afraid for my life. I sat shaking and breathing heavily. “Speak fox!”

“I-I-” The gun was cocked.

“SPEAK!”

“I- I'm F-Flechmen Foxwood, I found this by mistake.”

“You lie,” The man said quietly. “You know the one who lives here and you bring others with you. You are under arrest for treason, how do you plea?” I sat in silence. I was screwed no matter what.

“Hand over your weapon.” He said sternly.

“My wha?”

“Your dagger, place it on the floor.” I followed his instructions without question. The light dimmed and revealed a large man in a black suit. Rex sat at the table behind him.

“He's harmless.” Rex said casually.

“Get up!” The man said quickly. He grabbed my by the scruff of my neck and held me up high above his head. “How do you know about this place?”

“I was told when I worked for the government. I know nothing else.” I pleaded. He set me down in a chair next to the table. He sat at the other side next to Rex and pulled a laptop computer from under the table. He stared for a moment then looked over to me then back at the computer.

“I told you he was harmless.” Rex said, tipping his chair back against the wall. He gave me a strange look and mouthed “I'm so sorry.”

The large man pointed to the door and yelled “Get Out!” I didn't hesitate. I scrambled out of the door. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I began to see the tunnels I was running through. I opened a steel door at the end of a tunnel and shut it behind me. On the other side was my car, just the way I left it. I leaped over the top and jumped into the driver seat. I pounded the start button frantically and yanked the gas lever as hard as I could. The car sped through the tunnels and chambers and back onto the platform. When we were back on the surface, I pulled the gas lever again and sped off down the road. I stopped in front of the radio station and sat, terrified, breathing heavily and ears turned back. Will put his hand on my heaving shoulder.

“Are you all right?” I didn't answer. I put my hand and my other arm behind my head and knelt forward. I sat for a moment.

“I'll be right back.” I said. I walked off into the woods to relieve myself and came back to my car.

“What happened?” Amanda asked me.

“Government agents, shot gun, bad stuff. If my last job wasn't for the government I would have been shot.” I said, still trembling. “By the way, Rex can't come. Sorry.” I started the car again and drove to the door in the woods. Everyone got out of the car and stood around the door. John and Amanda went in. Will and I stood on opposite sides of the door and stuck out heads in at the same time. We both jumped back from what happened. John stuck his head out curiously.

“What just happened?” He asked.

“Flechmen and I were wondering what would happen if we went in opposite sides of the door. What happened over there?” Will said.

“Some strange demon stuck it's head through then went back. I guess that would be you two.” John said as I came around the door.

“That was strange. I could see color for a second.” I said.

“Let's just go through one at a time from now on.” John suggested. Will and myself nodded in agreement. All four of us walked through into the small library on the other side of the door. The house was very old and hadn't been lived in for many years. The furniture was still covered in dirty white sheets. The door was hidden behind a section of the book cases that opened up when a false book was pulled. Outside of the library was a long balcony that overlooked the great room. A staircase led from the middle of the balcony to the lower floor. The great room was large and open. There was a big fireplace with a pile of ashes in it and large double doors that led to the kitchen. The only furniture was a very old, beat up couch and an overstuffed leather chair. The room had a stereotypical retirement home smell to it. John went onto the kitchen and came back with a folding tray and a platter of sandwiches. Will and Amanda sat on the couch while John sat on the chair. I pulled a sandwich off of the tray and sat on the floor.

“Why don't you sit up here Flechmen?” Amanda asked me.

“Hm? If I did I would still be here after I left.”

"Oh, you shed?" John asked with a mouthful of sandwich.

"Yeah," I said quietly "I still have at least half of my winter coat still. Will, I'll have to borrow your vacuum sometime. That seemed to work really well."

"Use your own. I swear, I could have stuffed a pillow with what you left in there." Will said after finishing a sandwich. John and Amanda were trying hard not to smile. "That's nothing," Will began "When we were kids he would sneak into my house and roll around in my bed. I'd wake up the next day covered in red hair." Amanda giggled slightly. "Watch this." Will said. He leaned over and pulled at the back of my neck. Fur covered the inside of his hand as he held it up. "What happened to your dagger?" Will asked me after a long pause.

"Rex has it."

"Oh. The whole government agent thing?"

"Yeah." I said, feeling where the dagger had been.

"Fell out of your pocket?" John asked.

"It's a little big to put in my pocket. I had to leave it before I could leave that place. I'll show it to you when I get it back." I said, rubbing the stump at the end of my arm.

"I see you got your hand problem fixed." Amanda remarked. John gave her a stern look, almost saying "Don't ask about people's disabilities."

"Yeah," I replied anyway "But now the pain killer from the hospital is wearin' off and it's startin' to hurt a bit."

"I bet," Will said "but not bad enough to get the medication the doctor prescribed."

"No, not nearly. I hate taking medication, does weird stuff to me."

"Still has to hurt a little." Amanda said quietly.

"I can ignore pain dear. I was taught how when I was real little." John and his daughter looked over to me strangely. "Old traditions from the days of the wild, before humans came to the country."

"How are you taught to ignore pain?" John asked after a long pause.

"It's a process called tempering. Really it's just mind-over-matter. My parents, they're really good at it, they can step in a bear trap and think nothing of it. When I stepped in a trap, I screamed my head off for about a minute." John and Amanda had a look of "Oh, my" on their faces when I said this.

"Why on earth would you step in a trap?" John asked before taking a bite of a sandwich.

"I didn't want to! Last I checked my hide was worth about ten grand in the middle of winter. Shingle Falls is the only country where it's illegal to hunt or commercially breed my kind. The penalty for intentionally harming a fox used to be public lynching but now it's just the electric chair. People still set out those traps; big nasty bear traps with special locking mechanisms so even a reasonably intelligent creature like a human even can't get out of 'em." John and Amanda let this sink in for a moment before one of them spoke up.

"So how do *you* get out of them?" Amanda finally asked.

"I'm not human, and I was really determined. After about five minutes the poison on the trap starts drivin' ya mad."

"Believe it or not, he used to be sane." Will said jokingly.

"I'm the only sane one in my family and you know it!" I said quickly back to him.

"That may be," He said looking at his watch "Oh, crap, I have go."

"What? Why?" I asked.

"Appointment that I forgot about. Hate to break up the party but do you think you can give me a ride Flech'?" Before I could say anything, Amanda spoke up.

"Can we come back with you?"

"What for?" Will asked.

"Err, umm... we haven't met any of your family Will."

"I'm not sure you want to-"

"Or the rest of your's Flechmen." John said.

“You've met the sane ones. Where's your family? I'm sure your wife must have worried about you guys the other night.”

“I'm sure she would have been if I had one.”

“Hm, all this time I thought you were married.” Will said.

“None of my business, I won't ask.” I added.

“I've never been married.” This came as a bit of a shock to Will and I.

“I'm adopted.” Amanda added. Yet another surprise. There was an awkward pause.

“Well, this has been nice,” Will said “but I should get going, my son's education might be on the line.” At that, he got up and made for the stair case, almost knowing what would happen next.

“Y'all, wanna come, now's your chance.” I said and followed Will. The four of us got into my car and drove off to the center of the country. Children were at school, and parents were at work; leaving the streets nearly vacant. After leaving Will where he was to meet someone important I drove further to to the orphanage of Shingle Falls. The building was old and crumbling slightly. A plywood plank sat in place of one of the windows and a trashed lawnmower sat in the yard. It's deck looked like an explosive was set off inside of it and it left a large puddle of oil on the ground. In the main lobby, a young vixen worked at cleaning up the glass from the window. The tall bank desk that ran along the wall across from the door had a large hole bashed through it. Laryc Marinec, my brother-in-law, sat behind the desk. He was a terribly gaunt, sickly creature. His fur that was once flowing and shining was now just a shell of it's former glory. He was a much lighter color than myself and had a thin white mark that ran from the tip of one ear, across his brow and to the tip of his other ear. A light coating of cooking oil made him shimmer under the florescent lights. He opened his dim yellow eyes and stared at what came through the door.

“Hello Flechmen.” He said in his surprisingly deep, strong voice.

“Hey there! Where's Holiday?” I asked.

“Freak accident if I ever saw one. Renegade lawnmower blade came flying through the window and through the desk. Whacked her in the side then embedded itself in the wall.”

“What? How'd that happen?” I asked. Laryc looked over to his daughter.

“Sal-ee* {I'll get it later,}” He said.

“No you won't. You sit right there. No one wants to see you strain yourself.” She said back and continued working.

Laryc turned back to me “I honestly have no idea.”

“Is the baby alright?”

“As far as I know. It didn't seem like it hit her too hard but it cut her pretty bad.”

“Where is she though?”

“Hospital, where else? I'm sure she'd enjoy a visit from you.” He said.

“Yeah, well-”

“It seems like you've been avoiding each other like the plague.”

“Well, you know how she gets.”

“Please do tell me where you go. Sometimes I want out of here too.”

“Can't stand your own wife! What kind of husband are you?”

“Good question, but if you don't mind, I've had customers waiting,” He said as he looked over John and Amanda “Hello there.”

“We're with him.” John said.

“Oh, very well,” Laryc said laughingly “Have any other business for me hae-ke-a?”

“Well, uh... John, Amanda, this is Laryc my brother-in-law. I was hoping my sister Holiday would be here, but, what can you do? Laryc, this is John and Amanda Borges.” John put out his hand and Laryc bowed his head.

“'Tis a pleasure to meet ones who are not of this world.” Laryc said quietly.

* Daughter in Fox tongue

“What? But... how?” John asked.

“I know only what the Lord in Heaven tells me. Ask your friend's father and he will tell you the same.” The two humans stood in silence. “I'm sorry, is there something wrong?” Laryc asked after a long pause.

“No, no. Just, a little... dumbfounded.” John said.

“Well, we should get going. I'm a little concerned of my sister.” I said after more silence.

“Farewell Flechmen, and friends.” Laryc said. John opened the door and picked up what was on the other side. A wicker basket stuffed with blankets. He set it on the counter and left it for Laryc's inspection. “Oh, dear. That's the third one this week,” He turned his head to the room behind him “Eda! Come here, I have something for you!” He called out. A young vixen came from the back room and peered into the basket.

“I'll take care of it.” She said as she picked it up and went off to the back room once more.

“What was it?” Amanda asked.

“Oh, a baby. This is an orphanage after all.” Laryc told her.

“We should get goin'. I wanna find out more about our sister.” I said.

“Tell me what you find out.” Laryc said as we walked out the door. The three of us walked down the sterile halls of the hospital and were met by my sister walking the opposite direction. She was the runt of the litter and much smaller than me. She rarely worried about things like clothing and when she did it wasn't anything special. Her skin hung loosely on her frame and a look of determination shone on her face. Her now hairless stomach had two, perpendicular gashes across it that had been stitched and dressed by the doctors not long before.

“What are you here for?” She asked me quickly in her soft, singing voice.

“To see you shorty, why else?”

“I heard you were pretty sick yourself. You might want to move loudmouth, your blocking the way.” She said. John came up to her, not sure what to think.

“No, we're with him. Uh, err. I'm John.”

“From another world beyond the woods. Yeah, I heard about ya.”

“Wha... how?”

“You talked to my mother the other day. I'm sorry you have to see me like this, its been a stressful few hours.”

“I bet, you shouldn't be on your feet.” I said.

“Shove it! It's a luxury to not be on my butt for once in eight months.”

“Speaking of which, how's the kid?”

“A little premature, missing two toes, but otherwise fine. He'll live.” She joked. I met the boy later in his life. He's currently a guard at the King's Palace.

“Well, congratulations.” John said.

“What? Wasn't my kid,” John looked confused. “I was just the seragent mother. The real mother wasn't able to bear children.” The short vixen continued.

“Oh, that's... different.”

“Kinda interesting. Screws with your head though.” She said and laughed slightly. John nodded slightly. “How rude of me, you don't even know my name yet and I've already found something your uncomfortable talking about. I'm Holiday by the way.”

“Interesting name.”

“I guess everyday after I was born was like a holiday for my parents.”

“Your just special 'cause your the runt.” I said jokingly.

“You were always their little pet because you were the first born.” She snapped back.

“You two brother and sister? You sure act like it.” John interrupted.

“You couldn't tell that from our markings?” Holiday asked.

“Well, er... no.”

“Just so you know, the cross on our backs is the mark of the Foxwood family. All of the families have some kind of mark from the generations that were wild. Another something I find interesting.” Holiday said. I came up behind her and picked her up.

“Very interesting, yes. But you should not be on your feet and your husband's driving himself mad watching over all those little ones.” I said.

“He's been in that business longer than I have. Him and the girls should be able to handle it.”

“None the less. I know you won't stay here like you should so you better be put back in their hands.”

“I know you don't like me. I know you want me dead. OW^” She said sarcastically before I stepped on her tail that was dragging by my feet.

“You shouldn't joke like that. Some people might think your serious.” We walked out the front doors and to my car. Holiday laid across two of the back seats and Amanda sat in the third. We drove back to the orphanage and I carried Holiday back inside. Her son, a strong, young fox sat behind the desk with his back turned to the front door.

“My keeper has returned?” He asked.

“Yes, I have.” Holiday told him.

“You bring guests?” He asked without turning around.

“Yes, why don't you turn around and meet them. Guys, this is my only son, Woodrill.”

“I will not turn.” He said coldly.

“He's a little shy.” I told John and Amanda.

“I was horribly disfigured at birth. No one deserves to look upon my horrid face.”

“He was born without eyes.” Holiday said under her breath.

“Just turn around, they don't scare easily.” I told him. Woodrill turned in the computer chair. He had Laryc's markings and Holiday's features; along with two yellow marbles that served as something to fill the empty sockets in his head.

“Are you happy now?” He asked slowly.

“Your not disfigured.” Amanda told him.

“You flatter me.” He said coldly and turned back around.

“There's no help for him.” Holiday said quietly. “Where's your father and sisters?”

“Last I remember, they were my keepers. Not the other way around.”

“I think a little more than his face is disfigured.” Holiday said quietly, so her son would not hear.

“I heard that. I'm fully aware than I'm insane, the younger keepers remind me constantly.”

“He means his sisters.” Holiday said, rolling her bright golden eyes.

“How many children do you have?” John asked.

“Err... I think a hundred and fifty seven right now.”

“Wow. And, how old are you?”

“Oh, you mean *my* children. I have four. Three girls and him.” She pointed to her son. “And I'm the same age as Flechmen, we were born the same day. Well, close enough.” John and Amanda looked to me when she said this.

“I'm thirty six. I was born at eleven fifty nine at night and all my brothers and sisters were born the next day,” I looked down at Holiday “we need to get you to bed.” I told her.

“Your no fun.”

“Your bleeding.”

“Oh, whoops. Boy, get the other keeper, I'll be in my chamber.”

Woodrill looked over to us before going into the back room saying “Aye aye cap'n.” I carried Holiday to her bedroom on the second floor of the building.

“Why are you so nice to me today?” She asked me.

“Because you look so funny with a shaved belly. Have I ever been mean to you?”

“Do I really need to answer that? It's not everyday I get carried to my bed.”

“It's not everyday you get whacked by a lawnmower.”

“Good point. Isn't that just the freakiest thing? It shouldn't be possible if you think about it.”

“Have you seen the lawnmower? It's half eaten by rust.”

“Yeah. Anyway, you should go. I'm sure your very busy.” She said to me. I turned to leave and almost knocked Laryc over. John, Amanda and myself walked down the narrow hallway back to the elevator. Now and then children would run through the hallway. The elevator at the end of the hall opened and one of Holiday's daughters stepped out. She was much like her mother and was even the runt of the litter.

“Hello Scotti.” I said kindly.

“Uncle Flechmen,” she did a slight curtsy “mind if I ask what happened to you?”

“Caught in machinery. What mischief are you into?”

“Oh, nothing in particular. But I am busy and can't talk. Have a nice day father.” She walked off down the hall and went into her mother's bedroom. Scotti had always been Holiday's favorite, it made sense that she would be the first to see her mother. John, Amanda and myself went back to my van out front. After getting comfortable, I turned to John.

“Where to now?” I asked him.

“Who haven't we met?” He asked after thinking for a moment.

“Err... my brother Andrew, but he's working.”

“Alright. What do you do for work anyway?”

“Me? I'm retired. Until the carnival comes back. I worked at the air port until my little incident.”

“Oh.” He said. There was a long pause as I started the van and drove absentmindedly home.

“I'll have to take you to the carnival.” I said.

“Might be fun.” John said indifferently.

“I think it is. A lot safer than my old job at the airport.”

“Hmm.”

“Got shot twice. Once on purpose.”

“Hmm.”

“What did you say you did for a living?”

“Math teacher.” He said indifferently when I pulled around the side of my house.

“Sounds like fun. You wanted to go home didn't you?”

“That might be best.”

I drove him back to the door in woods. Nothing really interesting happened over the next few days. I did, however, get the pain medication my doctor prescribed. It did drive me nutty. To my knowledge, nothing came of that except a short physical relationship with a coat rack. Wednesday morning came. I was woken up by the door bell echoing through the hallways. I made my way slowly to the front and opened it. A very large man in a black suit and dark sun glasses was on the other side.

“Your car is ready.” He said quickly.

“My car?”

“Your Flechmen Foxwood?”

“Yes.”

“Then your car is ready.” He signaled for me to follow. I looked over his shoulder and saw a very fancy car parked in the street.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“Cleardale Hospital. You have an appointment.”

“Yeah... but why are *you* taking me?”

He let out a deep sigh. “Because, if the government knows that you'll be leaving the country, they'll send an armed guard with you. Since you are going to find out if your life is almost over or

not, they figured they would send you a car. If you wish to take your own car than thats fine but I still have to come with you.”

“Why do I get the special treatment? And how do I know your not some kind of kidnapper?”

“Any one of your kind has access to these services. And I would hope that you recognize me.”

I didn't recognize him because I was scared witless when I saw him. “Now that you mention it, you do seem somewhat familiar.”

He pulled my long dagger out of his pocket and handed it to me. “Not very sharp, works pretty good as a letter opener though.”

“Only the tip's sharp. So you can grab it by the blade and not cut yourself.” I reached behind my back and put the knife back in its place.

“Are you ready?”

“Let me get a shirt on.” I waked back into the house and back out again. I was led to the fancy car in the road. It was a big car, with gold trim and dark tinted windows. The inside was warm and inviting. The smell of leather upholstery filled the air when the door opened. I sat down on one of the sideways facing bench seats and got comfortable while the guard sat across from me.

“Let's go Mac,” he told the driver before turning to me. “Want a drink?”

“What kind of drink?”

“Any kind, what your favorite?”

“Roy Rogers would be nice.” He chuckled at this.

“Something a little harder?”

“I haven't had alcohol in years.”

“Something bad come of it?” He asked, pouring dark fizzing cola into a tall glass.

“Yeah. Their was a party and everyone was drunk out of their minds. One guy was murdered and I was the one with blood on my hands. I went to prison until they found a hidden camera and watched the tape in it.”

“Pretty wild.” He handed me the glass and made himself comfortable. It was a long trip and not much happened. The guard, he never told me his name, was always on the edge of his seat. He was always looking for something. Even without a shotgun in my face, I was still terrified of him. The driver was a quiet man, but sang from time to time. The trip was about three hours. I must have dozed off because I don't remember a lot of it. Cleardale was a pleasant city. The streets were well kept, the air was clean and everyone had a smile on their face. It seemed a little too perfect, but maybe thats just me. The hospital was a huge, beautiful building that had just gone under a large remodel. The front lobby was flooded with sunlight and smelled of the flowers that were in a large refrigerator against the back wall.

I walked up to the front desk and rang the silver bell. “{Good morning... oh...}” The receptionist said. “{I'm sorry, the veterinarian is down the road.}”

“{Syus told me to come here. I have an appointment.}”

“Ehm... {Have a seat. I'll get you in a minute, Mr...?}”

“Foxwood. Flechmen Foxwood.”

“{Thank you sir. The doctor will be out in a minute.}” She went into a back room for a while. I sat down in the lobby and stared at a painting on the wall until I felt a small hand touch my side. I looked down and saw a small, wide eyed child.

“{Doggy!}”

The child's mother had also been staring into the painting until her son spoke.

“{You get away from there!}” She scolded the little boy.

“{He's fine Ma'am.}” I don't think I can properly describe the look on her face when I said this. It said something, somewhere between “Holy crap it talks!” and “What is this creep trying to pull?”

“{You...uh... friendly?}” She held back the child and looked at me strangely. I dug through my shirt pocket and found a dinner mint that I gave to the little boy. I put on a cheerful face for the mother.

"{I never hurt anyone Ma'am.}" The little boy looked to his mother.

"{Can I pet the doggy?}" The mother looked to me and gave me a wink. I nudged the little boy with my nose. He turned around and stroked my head. The guard came up to me and tapped my shoulder.

"Be careful." He said quietly.

"It's a little kid."

"You can't be too careful."

"{Good doggy.}" The child told me.

"{Yes, good doggy.}" His mother reassured him.

"Flechmen!" Syus' voice rang through the fragrant air. I stood up and walked towards him. The guard followed.

"You don't have to follow me." I told him.

"He's safe here." Syus reassured him.

"I don't take chances, I just do my job." He said sternly. The three of us continued down the white hallways with black and white linoleum tiles.

"I thought of something the other day," Syus began as we were walking "if you have something, it's probably going to be completely different from anything I've dealt with. A fox disease if you will."

"If I have anything."

"Yes, if. Otherwise, it's just more debt, right? As I hear it you don't have insurance at this time."

"Yeah, yeah, don't remind me. I do have a lot in the bank from selling my old house though."

"Are you renting now?"

"No, no. Believe it or not, I won my new house in a contest on the radio."

Syus laughed slightly. "Is it a run down little shack or something?"

"No. It's a great big duplex that someone was killed in. The address might have something to do with it too. Thirteen-thirteen Dead End drive. The family didn't want it, the bank couldn't sell it, charities wouldn't even take it. The radio station bought it dirt cheap and gave it away without saying any details about it. And I won it."

"Nice, nice."

"There was even an old camper in the back yard that I sold to one of my friends." And I still have no idea how he got it into those caverns...

"Here we are." Syus said as he went through a door. The room on the other side was dimly lit and very warm. It smelled almost like someone turned on a gas fireplace that hadn't been turned on in a long time. That burning dust kind of smell. Syus led me through a glass door that went to a slightly brighter room with another one of those dreaded machines. "Well, same as before. Are we going to have any more problems with the tag?"

"Supposedly, this one's aluminum." I emptied my shirt pocket and pulled the long dagger from its usual place. I got comfortable on the table and tests began. About half an hour later Syus came back for me.

"That was interesting. Doesn't really seem possible."

"What?" I asked.

"Try to imagine, someone taking an orange, placing it on your head and going *splat!*" The hand movements that went along with this were very entertaining.

"Are you serious?"

"I don't know how your alive, I don't know how your not bed ridden. Heck, I don't know how your still able to have a conversation."

"Your not serious."

"I want you to get a second opinion."

"Well, how long do you think I have? Is there any way it can be fixed?"

"I'll be amazed if you make it to next week. Treatment? There's not nearly enough time to

coordinate something like that. Like I said, get a second opinion.”

“Well... uh... thank you.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be more helpful.” Syus said, escorting the guard and myself down the hall. The guard and I walked out to the lobby and to the front desk. The receptionist handed the guard the bill. He pulled out a large wad of money and took a few bills from it. He led me back to the fancy car. Fittingly, it was raining sideways. The both of us sat back in the car.

“Rum, just give me the bottle.” I told the guard. He handed me a half full bottle of amber liquid.

“That was rough.” He said. He handed the driver a sheet of paper new directions on it. It was another half hour drive to the other hospital. I only took a few sips of the rum before remembering the burning sensation of it going down my throat. The other hospital wasn’t as nice but they were waiting for me. The doctor was a tall, beautiful woman (or so I would guess from the guard’s sudden change in personality).

“You must be Mr. Foxwood.” She said in her smooth, sweet voice.

“Yep. Mind if we just get down to business.”

“Sure thing. Follow me.” She led us down a hall way where the guard almost slipped on the wet floors. Up a flight of stairs and down another hallway. The test, and the result was much the same.

“So I guess that’s the end.” I said.

“I wish it didn’t have to be.” She told me.

“The government will pay out quite a bit to keep him alive.” The guard interrupted.

“This isn’t something we can exactly do tomorrow.” The doctor told him.

“It’s fine, really it is. I’ve had a good life.” I said.

“I’m terribly sorry Mr. Foxwood.” She told me.

“It’s not your fault really.”

“I wish I could help.” She showed the way out. The guard walked strait into a window that was next to the door then after regaining his senses he walked out the door. We both sat in the car in silence. I pulled the cell phone out of my pocket and called my mother.

“Mom, I need everyone to come to dinner tonight.”

“Why?”

“Just... something to say. Have dad make something simple.”

“They found something didn’t they.”

“Yeah...” I heard a loud thud through my phone and my father’s voice in the background.

“Layla?” I hung up and sat for the rest of the trip in silence. Once back in my own home I laid down on the old couch. A strange feeling came over me. A feeling I felt once before. A feeling that death was just around the corner. I didn’t speak for the rest of the day until my parents let themselves in. My mother picked me up by the scruff and stared directly into my eyes.

“Your not serious.” She said.

“I am. I don’t want to be but I am.” She let me go. My father sat next to me. He pulled my head close to his and gazed on with his cloudy eyes. Eyes that seemed to look beyond their hazy coverings and deep into a person’s soul.

“{You will make it, I know it.}” He told me.

“{Dad,}” I placed my hands on his shoulders, “{what if I don’t?}”

“{You will. How come you’ve lived this long?}”

“{Doctors don’t even know. But I can feel that the end is near now.}”

“{Nonsense! It’s all in your head! You were perfectly happy yesterday and now today you think your going to die.}”

“{I don’t know what to think any more.} I might be dead before the end of the week. I want to spend as much time with everyone as I possibly can.” Will, Rex, John and Amanda came through the door and found seats in my living room.

“What’s going on bud?” Rex asked.

"I have maybe a week to live." I said. Everyone looked at me with wide eyes. "Listen, I'd like to spend as much time with you guys as I can. Will, Can I borrow your laptop?"

"Sure, sure. I'll go get it." He went to his car and came back with a battered laptop computer. He handed it to me and sat back down. Holiday, followed by Laryc, came through the door. Following them was two tall, thin vixens, Scotti the runt and Woodrill.

"We miss something?" One of the vixens asked.

"No, Eda, Um. Everyone find a seat." I said. I felt a strong hand grasp my shoulder. I looked up to find my hulking brother Andrew.

"Mom said you had something urgent to say." He said in his low, booming voice.

"Sit down. Have you seen Mitch and Mike?"

"They're coming." He rolled his eyes. My brothers, Mitch and Mike, have it in their heads that they have to tell everyone that asks all about themselves. They came in shortly after and shut the door behind them. They leaned on the back of the couch.

"We're here."

"So ya are. Grab a chair." They walked around the side of the couch.

I'm just going to stop here for a minute to explain them. They are conjoined twins who come together at the waist. From the waist up, they look like two normal Giant Foxes, from the waist down, they look like just one. Each controls one half of their lower body, making walking a clumsy task. No one really knows who controls the tail; it seems to sway to and fro with a mind of its own. They have thought of being separated but no doctor wants to do it the way they want it done. They seldom leave their chair unless it's for something important.

The twins sat on the floor. John and Amanda looked at them with great wonder. I cleared my throat loudly.

"Everyone," I let out a deep sigh "I might not see the end of this week. Doctors found that I have a tumor that is life threatening. Beyond that, actually, they were surprised that I'm not dead yet. I want to spend tonight with everyone and as much of tomorrow as you can. I'm going to start working on a list of things I need to do before I leave. I can only hope I can get everything done."

"This is certain, proven?" Holiday asked.

"Yes. But, I don't want us to be sad and troubled. I want the rest of my time to be happy. Hey I'm going home, why should we be sad about that?"

My father clicked his tongue loudly. "Let's eat before the food gets cold." His voice was full of sorrow and grief. He made one of my favorite dishes. A very old recipe for kabobs. Dinner was slow and uneventful. We sat and remembered old times until late hours of the night. It was about ten in the morning when I woke up and found everyone else sleeping in my living room. My parents were curled up apart from one another while Holiday slept in Laryc's warm grasp. John was half covered by my brother Andrew while Amanda slept in a folding chair. Rex seemed to be the only one to find a comfortable place to sleep. He was on the couch, with my deer skin trench coat over him. Will was on the floor, cuddling the coat rack as though it were his wife. The twins formed an awkward mass that occupied the area around a floor board heater. Holiday's brood were nowhere to be found until the two larger vixens came through the kitchen door with a pot of oat meal between them.

"Morning." I said to them.

"Morning." They replied in unison. Scotti came out with a platter of bacon and sausages. People began to wake up slowly. Andrew was the first. He tapped John lightly on the shoulder.

"Well good morning sweetie." John jumped up in disgust while Andrew rolled laughing in delight. Rex stood from the couch and took the coat rack from Will's sleeping hands.

"Well, that was good night." He said as he put my coat back on the rack and placed it next to the door. Will woke up from being moved by Rex.

"Morning." He said, rubbing his eyes. Laryc woke up and nibbled Holiday's ears until she stirred. My father, who had actually been awake for some time, stood up and rubbed my mother's head

until she got up. She waved him off and looked around. She found her wooden paw leaning against a chair. She took it and screwed it into its mount on the end of her real leg. John helped her stand up.

“You and your husband sleep well last night?” He asked.

“I slept fine. But I'm not married. He's my cousin if he's anything.” She straightened the fur on her head and flapped her limp ears back to their usual place.

“*Second* cousin,” my father interrupted “the thought of sleeping with anyone that closely related to me is sickening.”

“Oh.” John said.

“Don't worry, I've had people ask me if he was my *brother*! What kind of a pervert do they think I am?” My mother told him.

“Err.. Food's on the table.” John said, frantically trying to get out of the conversation.

“Flechmen!” My mother called out. I looked over to her. “No, your father.” She told me. My father looked over at her. “Did you make breakfast?”

“No, Holiday's little ones did.”

“Oh, looks good.”

“Thank you.” Woodrill remarked before vanishing into the kitchen once more. The door bell echoed through the house. I answered the door and found one of my younger neighbors and his friend.

“Mr. Foxwood,” my neighbor started “can you get our Frisbee off your roof?”

“Did you put it up there just to see me get it down?” I asked.

“My friend hasn't seen it.”

“You should ask me before you throw it up there.” He pulled the Frisbee from behind his back.

“I remember, you told me last time.”

I thought for a moment. “Go ahead.” He went out onto the lawn and threw the Frisbee on to the roof of my house. I climbed onto the deck railing then jumped up and grabbed the gutter with my hand. I swung back and forth until I got my feet on the roof and pulled myself up.

“I told you he was awesome.” My neighbor told his friend. I found the Frisbee and threw it as hard as I could. It flew and hit the chimney its owners house then landed on back part of the roof. I jumped down and landed in front of my neighbor and his friend.

“I might not be around to do that again.” I told them.

“Thanks Mr. Foxwood.” He said as he and his friend ran off. I went back inside and sat at the table with everyone else. After breakfast, I made a list of things I wanted to do before I died.

1. Make amens with enemies and ask for forgiveness from people I used to torment. This led to quite a few awkward phone calls but was mostly successful.
2. I wanted to rent a limousine but after yesterday I figured it would be pointless and scratched this off the list.
3. Skydiving. Couldn't be done on such short notice :(
4. Sushi. I wanted to try it and I found that I like it.
5. Church.

I should explain that last one. Ever since the founding of Shingle Falls there has been a law in place to keep settlers from imposing their religious beliefs on the locals (mostly Giant Foxes). The law states that only humans may attend church services. As a dying wish, I wanted to attend church, welcome or not.

As for the rest of the list, I only got #1 and #4 done that day. The next day, I figured that I should get ready for my departure. The feeling of death was stronger than ever and I feared that I might collapse at any minute. The first thing I had to do was see a groomer. My fur had become mangy and unruly after a few weeks of not being groomed. The groomer I usually went to was a dog groomer but didn't mind me coming in. He was a tall skinny man with short brown hair sea colored eyes. I walked into his shop and looked around.

“Sorry, we're closed- Oh, hi Flechmen, the most wonderful friend in the whole world.” The

groomer said as he walked up to me.

“What do you want Carl?” I asked.

“Nothing. Just, tolerance of my little sister.” He replied.

“Your sister?”

“Yeah. Come on in. How are you?”

“Dying. How are you, how's the wife?”

“It has been hot out today. Sheryl's fine. We have another little rascal on the way.”

“Your kidding. What's this, number thirteen?”

“Yeah, pretty crazy. We don't know if its a boy or a girl yet, we just found out yesterday.” He led me to a back area where the dogs were usually taken care of. A beautiful elvish girl with long brown hair was sitting next to a grooming table.

“Oh, hi!” She said when Carl and I walked in.

“Flechmen, this is my sister Tera, and this is Flechmen and he doesn't mind being a teaching tool.” Carl said.

“Hi Flechmen.”

“Hello Tera.” We shook hands. I jumped up on the grooming table and pulled off my shirt. I handed the shirt and my dagger to Carl.

“What happened to your hand?” Carl asked.

“I got caught in some machinery. Anyway, I need to look nice for a funeral.”

“That's sad, whose?”

“Mine. I told you, I'm dying.”

Carl looked me in the eyes. “No! Why, what happened?”

“Brain tumor. I could die at any moment. So, if you can get this done as quickly as possible it would be great.” I told him.

“Alright.” He said and began working. Tera sat in a chair at the end of the table and pulled out a drawing pad.

“What ya drawing?” I asked.

“You, if that's okay.”

“Sure, I don't mind.”

“I see you sometimes, in the forest. I've tried to draw you before but you always manage to run away.”

“You can always just ask me.”

“Well, I wasn't sure. Until now I thought you were a wild animal.” She said with a laugh.

“I try not to be. In the woods, instinct kinda takes over. Ooh, easy there Carl.”

“Sorry.” He said and went back to work. He worked faster than usual in a frantic attempt to not let me pass on in his hands. The next chore on my to-do list was to go to the cemetery and find the perfect plot. I found a grave that was in a back corner of the cemetery and almost in the forest. Last thing I did that day was visiting a mortuary. Mortimer, of all people, was the owner of the only mortuary in all of Shingle Falls. Surprisingly though, he doesn't get much business. He was a very old half-dwarf with graying hair and thick spectacles. I walked up to his desk and woke him up.

“Good evening sir. How may I help you?”

“I need a casket and a headstone.” I told him.

“I can't do headstones but I'll show you what I have in the way of caskets.” He led me to a back room and left me to find something that interested me. I think as a joke he showed me the dog caskets. One particular casket caught my attention. It was resting on saw horses in the middle of the warehouse. It was made from solid oak and stainless steel handles. The inside was lined with white silk and heavily padded. I couldn't resist, I climbed inside...

I left a note on my front door. It told where I would be in the event that people looked for me. Will and Rex came to my house to make sure I was still alive. They traveled to the mortuary and asked if I had

been seen. Mortimer showed my friends into the warehouse.

“Flechmen!” My friends called out.

“Mr. Foxwood!” Mortimer called. He walked over to the casket I was in and opened it. “Oh, my.”

Will and Rex rushed to Mortimer's side. Will picked up my lifeless body from the casket and held it in his arms. “Why? Why couldn't we be here? He died alone.”

I should clarify that I was able to see everything that was going on. I'll explain later.

“He would have wanted it that way.” Rex told him.

“How much is that casket?” Will asked.

“Take it. I have to say, that's the first time I've ever had some one die in one of my coffins.”

Mortimer told my friends. That night Will and Rex brought my family to my house for dinner.

Everyone knew what happened but no one talked about it. Will stood up at the end of dinner and cleared his throat.

“Everyone, as you might have guessed, Flechmen is no longer with us.” The room fell silent.

“I have a feeling,” my father began “that he's watching us.”

“We can hope he's in Heaven, but no one really knows.” My mother said.

“I'm sure he is.” Rex said.

Andrew hit the table hard with a tight fist. “He wanted us to be happy for him. That was a dying wish of his. We need to find a church, hold a Celebration of Life, then chuck 'im in the hole.” Everyone agreed with him.

“Who should we invite?” Laryc asked.

“We should just say that anyone that knew him is welcome to come.” My father suggested.

“Let's go home tonight, I think I can get everything taken care of.” Will said. Everyone left slowly and mournfully. Will stayed behind and scheduled a few things. He sent a message to the pastor of a local church who was more than happy to let my family use a back room of the church for my services. The paper that was printed the next day had a general invitation in it. It said that anyone that knew me or was effected by me was welcome. Services were to be held that Sunday after normal church services. Will and his wife planed for a good sized party. When my mother checked her mailbox Sunday morning, she found it stuffed with cards. At almost eleven o'clock Will left his home and came to the church. He walked in the door and heard music. He figured that church wasn't over yet but he went into the auditorium anyway. He hid in the back of the massive room and enjoyed the music. He listened for a while before recognizing the voice singing. He built up the courage to look down the aisle and up to the stage. The first thing he recognized was my brother Andrew playing drums. He looked around a little more and found my mother playing a large synthesizer and my father playing guitar and singing. Will half expected to see Holiday playing bass but a young faun that he didn't know took her place. When the song was over, my father set down his guitar gently. He made his way to the podium at the front of the stage and tapped the sensitive microphone. A loud chirp rang through the massive speaker cones that were suspended from the ceiling. My father instinctively backed away. He pulled the microphone he was singing into off of its stand.

“Morning everyone! Sorry about that. I'm assuming you all knew my son somehow, I'm also sure that a lot of you thought this was *my* funeral. Instead of me standing up here and talking for hours, it should have been my son.” My mother whispered in his ear. “I hear William Mirden is in the room. Give him a round of applauses! He's the one responsible for all this and was one of my son's best friends!” While he spoke, will slowly sneaked behind the sound board. The sound technician looked over to him and handed him a microphone that was on the table next to the old sound board.

“I'm afraid it's a little soon for me to say anything about my friend. He was a good friend and I think he would like all this if he was here. (sniff) I'll let someone else talk.” He sat down in an extra chair and kept his eyes on the stage. I didn't pay all that much attention to the whole thing. I find funerals (especially my own) boring. I did recognize a lot of the people that spoke. My former

employer, a few neighbors, Carl the groomer, my siblings, etc., etc... A few people that came did think it was my father's funeral. I didn't recognize many of them. There were even a few people that I never met. A Young woman who's mother I somehow saved, a gas station attendant who over heard me talking to his boss about Jesus and decided to come to church the next week, etc., etc... A long parade followed the Hurst to the graveyard. A few random people carried my coffin to the grave site, followed by a group of bagpipe players.

"The bagpipe players are pretty good," my mother remarked to Rex and Will "where did you hire them?"

"We thought you hired them." Rex said.

"I think they just came." Will added. Everyone gathered around the coffin that was suspended over the grave. The pastor from the church, who was a tall, cheerful man, said a few words. People forgot all about a party and went home. The coffin was gently lowered into the grave and the grounds keeper moved a cement slab over the top with a tractor. Later in the week, my parents built up the strength to go through my home. They sorted through my mail that had piled up over the days I was gone. One letter caught my mothers attention.

"Listen to this," she said to my father "from the Yong Institute of Medical Technology: 'Dear Mr. Foxwood, we have received word of your condition and believe we can help. We are coming to an end of a successful year and have three students capable of treating such problems as yours. If you are interested, please call.'"

"Go figure," my father said "a few days sooner, and we might still have a son."

"Everything happens for a reason."

"We should visit him." The two sat in silence for a minute, then walked out the door. They pulled into the parking lot of the grave yard in my mother's red sports car. They sat by my grave and talked of the fun they had raising me and my siblings.

A few, very confusing things happened at once. There is a Heaven, it it was never as real to me before as it is now. I had always believed it, but seeing... The indescribable beauty of the whole place. Just the gate, the magnificent gates; I could have stared for all eternity just at the gates. Sadly, thats as far as I got because 'it wasn't my time.' Of course I asked when my time was going to be and I was told that I would know. While it wasn't my time to fully leave the earth, there was a time that I wasn't meant to be there. This was the time that I was able to watch my funeral and everything. The time to return had come. I would have sat upright in my grave if the coffin lid didn't stop me. I laid back down and made sure I didn't break my nose. I tried to push the lid open but I found out how well the locking device worked instead.

"This could not get worse." I told myself

Phfffft...

It just got worse. In a frantic attempt to get fresh air, I kicked the lid with all my might and was relieved by a fresh breeze that came through the hole I made. After a while, I realized what my head was resting on. The shirt I was wearing that day was wrapped around my dagger and placed under my head. I found my cell phone and used it as a flashlight to find the latch on the coffin lid. I found it and jammed my dagger into it with as much strength as I could in the tight space. The lid finally came open. I stood up and took note of my surroundings. A small, concrete box with stagnant water accumulated on the bottom. I sat down on the coffin and tried to rethink everything that happened over the past few days. I thought of how to get out. I wasn't tall enough to reach the lid of the box, nor strong enough to move it. I panicked a little before realizing what I was using as a flashlight. I called the first person who's number came to mind.

"Hello?" Will answered.

"Will?"

"Yes, may I ask who's calling." I pictured him looking at his caller ID and thinking "who has Flechmen's cell phone?"

"I don't think you'll believe me."

"I won't?"

"I'm Flechmen."

"Flechmen is dead, and I don't appreciate you-"

"No, Will, it's me. It wasn't my time and they sent me back, and now I'm stuck in a hole. It's cold, and dark, and I farted, and dang it I'm hungry!"

"Oh, really? Why do you have a cell phone if your in a grave?"

"I don't know, you buried me with it."

"Really?"

"Ask me a question, only something I would know."

"Where were my children born? Thats something only Flechmen and my wife know."

"My living room. I helped. I always shook their left hands because thats the hand that knows your wife a little too well."

"How? Wait, your alive?"

"Yes, get me out of here!" About an hour later, Will ran up to my parents who were relaxing in the graveyard.

"Hey, guys. I have great news but I doubt you'll believe me until you see it." Will told my parents. The grounds keeper came up in the tractor. He dug in the sod and attached a large hook to a metal rod that was embedded in the cement lid.

"Whats going on?" My mother demanded.

"You'll see." Will said excitedly. The grounds keeper pulled forward in the tractor. The slab of cement moved. Everyone looked into the hole.

"Hi!" I said to everyone. They looked at me in shock. I stood on the coffin and jumped out of the hole.

"We... buried you alive?" My father asked.

"No, I was dead, and at the gates of Heaven. But it wasn't my time." I told him.

"Are you cured? Are you staying?" My mother asked.

"I'm not cured, but I am here for now. I still feel like death's around the corner. I'm starving though, lets get something to eat."

"You must be hungry, you've been dead for four days." My father said.

"It's been that long? Oh well, let's just eat." I said as I walked past everyone to the parking lot. They caught up to me and escorted me to Will's car. We drove through a fast-food restaurant where we ordered a large amount of food. I think I ate five of the regular hamburgers, two large orders of fries, and a big frozen concoction. My parents brought me back to my home. A table was set up in the middle of the main room and papers were scattered everywhere. My mother sifted through the mess and brought a letter to me. I read it and laughed.

"What do you think about that?" My mother asked.

"I'll call 'em. I will." I told her. I looked through the piles of paperwork that was scattered all over the floor. There was letters, cards, a few 'get well soon' notes, bills, newspapers, and various personal paperwork.

"Sorry for the mess." My father said as he sat at the table. He felt around until he found his braille Bible. He held the heavy book in his arms. "Do you want help cleaning up?"

"I think I can handle it. You know, a lot of people might be mad to see me alive, after that huge funeral."

"You saw it?" My father asked.

"Yeah, the whole thing. I never though that many people cared."

"We should help you clean up," my mother said "and have a family meeting tonight."

"Yeah, thats a good idea. I'm not cured but something really cool did happen." I told her. We cleaned up the papers and made neat piles in a back room. I found my death certificate and put it in my

pocket. My father sat in a chair and 'read' his Bible. I walked up to him and patted his head. He jumped up with a wild yelp and fell to the floor. I rushed to help but he picked himself up.

"Your very different now aren't you? You have an ability that no one else has." He said.

"Yeah, I was going to wait until tonight."

"And I think you can pass that ability to others." My father said. My mother came over wondering what happened. "Layla," my father said and starred right at her "I think I have better eyesight than *you*."

"What?" My mother turned her head to the side.

"I did ask for something, when I was... up there..." I said.

"What?" My mother asked.

"I asked if I could see color, and The Lord said 'Yes'. And, I guess, I can let other people see too."

"That's wonderful, why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"Well, I kinda didn't think about it because I got used to seeing things in color in Heaven." I said. She sat next to me.

"So, you can pass this onto others?" She asked.

"I guess so, I don't know how I did it though."

"Just do to me what you did to your father." I reached over to her and patted her head. She opened her eyes and a look of astonishment came over her face. We gazed into one another's faces in a way that we never could before. I looked at her intently. Her ear tips were black and faded to dark red that continued across her head with a thin black stripe that ran down the middle of her head. The stripe split in two and ran along the top of her bright, golden eyes. Her dark red coloring continued from her eyes and down her face to the end of her snout. The red faded into a damp black nose. The underside of her snout and her neck were pure white. Gray hairs that grew with age stuck out at random mostly around her nose. We must have starred at each other for a good five minutes before my father cleared his throat loudly. My mother and I looked over to him. All three of us starred at each other for a while. My father's colors were very different. His entire coat was pure white. His nose was pale pink and his eyes were blood red. He looked much the same in color as he did in monochrome.

"Well, this has been fascinating." My mother broke the silence.

"After years of being told how beautiful we are, we finally get to see it." My father said, half to himself. The door bell went off and echoed through the empty spaces of the house. My father answered the door and let Rex in.

"Hey guys... Whoa, Flechmen?" Rex said as he came in.

"Yeah, hey--"

"No, your dead, your an impostor."

"No, I'm alive, for now."

"That's not possible. Who are you?"

My father went up to him. "It is Flechmen, he's come back."

Rex walked up to me and touched my head. "It really is you." He said.

"Yeah, it is." I said.

"But, how?"

"I'll explain later. Come to dinner tonight."

"Dinner will be at the hospital." My mother interrupted.

"Why?" I asked. My mother let out a deep sigh and a bit of a moan.

"Your sister has run into a few... complications." She said.

"Is she alright?" I asked.

"For now, she's been in a lot of pain though. She shouldn't have gone home after her last visit."

"Yeah, I tell you what though, that new medication they give you lasts a long time and makes you feel invincible." I told her.

"That's what they gave you for your hand huh?"

"Yeah, I should have stayed in the hospital for that too. Oh, well, I'm sure she'll be fine."

My father spoke up after gathering the scattered metal pages of his Bible. "We should get going, you have a phone call to make." He told me. My mother and father left out the door. My mother came back in an dragged Rex out by his ear.

"Ow, hey, let me go." He complained sarcastically. I sat in a chair and re-read the letter from the university. I called their number; a secretary answered. I asked if I could speak with the doctor who signed their name on the letter.

"Hello, this is Dr. Killings." She said in a kindly voice.

"Hi, I'm Flechmen Foxwood, you sent me a letter."

"Oh, yeah. You have a brain tumor, that's right. I was just looking over the results of your last test. I thought it might have gotten you because you didn't respond for a while."

"How'd you get those results?"

"They were sent from the Department of Medical Records in Shingle Falls. Were you not informed?"

"No, I wasn't. It doesn't matter."

"Right, anyway. Would you like to visit the campus maybe sometime this week? Maybe Friday or Saturday? You'll get to meet the students that will be performing the operations and we might be able to run a few more tests while you're here."

"That sounds fine. What time on Friday?"

"Ten 'o'clock would be perfect."

"How can I get there?" She gave me detailed instructions from the country border all the way to the university. I thanked her and she thanked me. I sat in my chair for a moment after we hung up. I took a nap in the soft grass in my back yard and woke up later in the evening. I got up and picked a green rosebud off one of the bushes that grew behind my house. I walked to the front of my house while eating the fresh rosebud. I made my way to the hospital at a leisurely pace and enjoyed the new view of the country and the magnificent sunset. I was the first to come to Holiday's room for dinner.

"Who is it?" She asked from her bed without moving. Her voice sounded tired and stressed.

"Flechmen." I said. I walked around the bed and into her view. She looked at me with confusion and wonder.

"Am I dead?"

"No, I'm alive."

"No, what? I must be seeing things... these crazy drugs."

"No, I'm really alive. How are you?" I rubbed her head gently. She looked me in the face with a strange look.

"Yeah, I'm dead. I'm seeing color now." She laid her head back down on the pillow. Our parents came in and set a tray of food down on a table. My father stroked his daughter's head gently. She looked up at him. "Your here too?"

"Yes, {I'll always be here for you my daughter.}" He told her. Now confident that she was dead, Holiday closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

"Poor thing." My mother whispered. Dr. Rile entered the room and pulled us into a corner.

"She's been pretty out of it for a while, don't expect to have an intelligent conversation with her just yet." The short doctor told us.

"Is she alright though?" I asked.

"Yeah. She just needs to stay off her feet for a while." He said.

"Want some dinner?" My mother asked Dr. Rile.

"It's the best thing I've cooked in years." My father said.

"I'd love to but I have other things to attend to." The doctor said. He left to go about his business elsewhere in the hospital. I found the bathroom and went to wash my hand. I heard my brother

Andrew come through the door of the room. He sat in a chair with his back to me. I snuck up behind him and tapped his shoulder. He jumped into the air, did a wild turn and kicked the chair he was sitting in across the room.

“Holy crap, Flechmen? Where'd you come from?” He yelled. He stood up and stared at me. His tail found its way between his legs.

“I am a ghost.” I said in a spooky voice. Andrew came up to me and put his muscular hand on my shoulder.

“How'd you get here?”

“I'll explain later. But first, close your eyes.” He closed his eyes and I patted his head. He stepped back when he opened his eyes.

“Holy smokes.” He whispered.

“Yeah, dad found out I can do that.”

“Dad can see?”

“I sure can!” Our father interrupted. Andrew picked him up off the ground in a loving embrace.

“Thats wonderful!”

“Ugh! My back, my back!” Andrew let our father down. He stood for a moment then made a quick movement to straiten his spine.

“Sorry, I hurt ya?”

“No, I just want to be able to walk when I'm older. I'm only seventy seven.” My father smiled and rubbed his back.

“You know where everyone else is?” I asked my father.

“Close, but I can't say how close. I haven't seen your other-worldly friends in a while, are they alright?”

“As far as I know; I haven't seen 'em either.”

“Pity, I liked 'em.”

“I should talk to them. I don't think they know what all's happened.”

“You should. I think someone's knocking.” My father pointed at the door. I opened it.

“Flechmen?” Laryc asked upon seeing me. His children looked in awe from behind him.

“Yeah, I'll explain later. Just come on in.” I told him. He walked in slowly as though he were in pain. The children followed him mournfully. I rubbed Woodrill's head playfully as he walked by. He jumped up, fell backwards, then scrambled around on all fours until I helped him up.

“What the heck did you do?” He asked.

“I was hoping I would fix your 'deformity.' Did I?” He looked me straight in the eyes. His eyes had turned from the lifeless glass marbles to bright, vibrant eyes that were almost the same color as the marbles.

“Uhm... Thank you?” His sisters and father were curious and started to gather around me.

“I should probably explain,” I began “Since I came back, I have a gift that I can give to others. I'll explain more later; but first, close your eyes.” I walked past Laryc and the three vixens and rubbed their heads as I did. They opened their eyes and took a step back in surprise.

“How long does this last?” Laryc asked.

“I don't know. It hasn't gone away for me yet and I hope it never does.” I told him.

“Laryc,” My father called out “you alright?”

“No,” Laryc replied “back problems again.”

“Lay down, I wanna try something.” Laryc followed my father's instructions and laid down on an empty hospital bed. My father walked up to him. He said a prayer in the fox tongue then laid his hands on Laryc's back. He pushed down with all his weight.

“Yaagh!” Laryc cried as his spine cracked loudly. My father helped him stand up. “That feels a lot better, thanks.”

“Thought it might. I've been wanting to do that for a long time but it's hard to be a blind healer.”

"I need to see you more often. Human doctors have no idea what they're doing." Laryc said.

"Well, even a skilled healer like me is a little mystified by your condition. It's not something that's exactly common."

"Yeah, but still, all its caused me is more pain."

"Shouldn't be so hard on 'em," I said "you were bed ridden for months because of the pain before you finally saw a doctor."

"That one time," he replied "after that it was down hill. Doesn't matter. I'm feeling better now."

"When are we going to eat?" One of Holiday's daughters asked.

"We were going to wait for your mother." My mother told her.

"I think she's pretty out of it," my father said "we should eat before the food gets cold." My mother stood up from her chair and took the tin foil from the tray of food. She took a large bite from a glazed chicken leg.

"Flechmen, this is the best thing you've made in a long time." She said to my father.

"I'm glad you approve." My father replied. Everyone started pulling out pieces of chicken that were dripping with sweet honey glaze. Laryc sat near his wife's head while their children sat around her. Everyone else pulled up chairs.

A pretty elvish girl walked in to check on Holiday. "It smells so wonderful in here."

"Come and eat." My mother invited her.

"Sorry, I'm a vegetarian. I was just checking up our patient."

"She's asleep." Laryc said then took a bite from a juicy chicken breast.

"Okay, thank you. I'm going before I'm tempted anymore." She almost ran from the room with a disgusted look on her face. After she left, Will and Rex entered the room.

"Still alive Flechmen?" Rex asked.

"Yes indeed." My father replied.

"No, the other Flechmen."

"I'm doin' good Rex." I told him.

Are you going to tell us the story behind your death?" Will asked as he pulled up a chair next to me.

"I can." I said.

"We'd love to hear it." My mother told me.

"Well," I began "where to start? I was looking through a warehouse full of coffins and I found one that looked nice. I wanted to see what it was like inside so I got into it and closed the lid. It was so comfortable that I fell asleep. I felt almost like a... a cold breeze and I saw my body then I saw the coffin then the roof of the ware house. I turned around and saw this... a.... a light. But, not like a normal light. Then I saw the arms of the Savior. And I felt my feet hit something solid. Then, there was the gates. Just, massive golden gates with that majestic light behind them. I walked up to the gates and looked at them. I asked 'why are they closed' and this... voice... I don't know, like thunder and roaring waves but it was filled with such love and compassion. I don't doubt it was the voice of God. It told me, err, He told me, '**It's not your time. You will have to go back to earth.**' I asked, 'why? When is my time?' He told me '**I still have work for you. You will know when your time is.**' I saw the clouds below me open up and God told me to look. I saw Will and Rex come into that warehouse. I saw it like I was standing behind 'em. I saw all of you react when you heard the news. I saw *you* mother almost kill Will when he told you where my body was-"

"I didn't think he'd just throw you in the back of his car and bring you to my house."

"What was I supposed to do, leave him there?"

"Guys, guys! Let me finish! Where was I? Right. I saw all the preparations for the funeral, I saw the funeral itself. Heck, I asked God if I could sign the guest book but He said I probably shouldn't. Then I saw you bury me... I looked to God, and He told me '**Now is your time to return.**' I just stared and said 'but they buried me! I'm supposed to go back and die underground? My body's decomposed by

now...' But He told me 'I will take care of it.' So I put my trust in him. I felt like I was being pulled towards the hole in the clouds. But before I jumped in I asked, 'can I have this kind of eyesight on earth, it's been a wish of mine since I was a kit.' I felt something warm and soft touch my head and God said 'you will see color, but you will only have vision like this when you return to Heaven. Remember to put your trust in Me, I will provide.' I fell down the hole and was falling through the air. The closer I got to earth... (I don't know how to say it)... it felt more real. I started to feel the wind on my face and the feeling of falling. The earth came closer and closer. I saw the graveyard clearly. I closed my eyes because I thought it would hurt when I hit the ground but suddenly I felt myself try to sit up and I banged my nose really hard on the lid of the coffin. Then I started to get all of my feelings back. I felt hungry, stiff. And that was about it." I stood up and selected a plump chicken breast from the pan that was once full. I dug into it deeply and waited for questions. Everyone stared with immense fascination.

"That's what it's like to die huh?" Laryc asked.

"Yeah," I replied "I actually can't wait to do it again. Maybe without coming back next time."

"It's getting late," Andrew mentioned "I have to get to work in the morning." He stood up and made for the door.

"Be careful, I don't want to loose another one." My mother called after him.

"We should get going too." My father said to my mother.

"Hate to leave you Flechmen." My mother said to me.

"Don't worry about it. I should go too." I said. My parents left out the door with a final goodbye.

"Thanks for what you did." Laryc sat at the end of Holiday's bed.

"It's nothing." I said.

"No, it's something. Kids, why don't you wait outside." Laryc dismissed his young. They filed out of the room and waited in the car. Laryc looked to me. "I was curious, well, worried actually, what it was like to die. But hearing that gives me a little hope."

"I went in a nice way."

"Yeah. Didn't suffer. It's almost a punishment in the old culture to die alone though. I'd want to be around the people I care about."

"I didn't exactly choose the place."

"You climbed inside of a coffin with a locking lid. Talk about ironic."

"I could have just been walkin' down the street and collapsed. With you, your death should be a little more predictable."

"That's the thing, I really don't know. This is the first known instance of this... disease that's shown up in hundreds of years. I wondering why I'm not dead yet."

"So was I until it happened. I think it's the Grace of God that's holdin' us both."

"Your right. Well, I should go. Have a good night Flechmen. We really should talk more often."

"Yeah. Have a good night. I'll see you around."

"Good bye." He walked slowly out the door. I gave Holiday a last little pat and made my way back home. Outside was pitch black except for the occasional street light. I walked up to my door but decided that a night like this doesn't come around often enough. I didn't realize that Rex and Will had the sprinkler system in front of my house fixed. I was sleeping peacefully under a table when the little black rods stuck up from the ground and emitted their freezing rain. I jumped up and knocked over the cheap plastic table. I saw John and Amanda walking the path to my front door.

"Morning!" I said as I walked out of the mist of sprinklers and onto dry land. I shook myself off.

"Did we... come at a bad time?" John asked and raised an eyebrow.

"No, why?"

"Your... um... you forgot to put a shirt on."

"And?"

“Aren't you embarrassed?”

“No, why would I be?”

“I just thought... maybe your dressed a little inappropriately.”

“What would be appropriate?” I asked as I walked up to my front door.

“A shirt, maybe some pants.” John suggested.

“If you can find my shirt, I'd love to have it. I think my cell phone's in the pocket. And, have you ever seen me wear pants?” I opened my door and pulled the deer skin trench coat off the rack. I wrapped it around my dripping wet body and walked back to John.

“That's better.” He turned his head to the side slightly and felt the furry collar of the trench coat. “What's this?” He asked.

“Well, it's deer skin on the outside and fox skin lined.”

“Wasn't anyone you know I hope.”

“No, it was my great uncle. He was killed about eighty years ago. He was a famous ax murderer, killed quite a few people. The government told my family to 'take care of him.' So, they did. Anyway, I found the pelt one day and had it attached to the deer skin.” John had an almost disgusted look on his face. “If you think that's strange, wait 'till you hear about some of my other hobbies.” I gave him a slight smile.

“Do I want to know?”

“I don't know. Do you?”

“Well, I'm curious now.” Amanda said.

“Well, I haven't done this in a long time but I used to try and find fox pelts on the market and buy them then try to return them to the families they belong to. The problem is, is that sometimes they don't want what I found so now I have a box full of pelts. A lot of people find that kind of disturbing. Always makes my parents shiver when they find it.”

“Oh, how... pleasant.” John muttered.

“Yeah, anyway, you want to come in? I haven't see you in a while, we have a lot to talk about.” I walked trough my door and signaled for Amanda and John to follow. I hung my coat back on the rack and laid across the couch.

“We haven't seen you in a while.” Amanda sat at the end of the couch. She tried to pet my legs but I moved away from her when she touched me.

“I haven't been around. That's what I wanted to talk about...” I told them the story of what had happened over the past few days. Much like my family, they looked on in wonder (and possibly disbelief).

“How do you know it wasn't just a dream?” John asked as he sipped water from a crystal glass.

“Well,” I began “I can see color now. I'd like to see science explain that away.” I pulled my dagger from behind me and tried to clean the dirt from my blunt claws.

“It's nice to have you back anyway.” Amanda had been moving closer and closer to me. When she said this, she went so far as to run her hand down my back. I pushed myself into the couch in an attempt to trap her hand.

“I can't say it's nice to be back. Honestly, I don't want to be here. I want to see what's beyond the gates.” I said. Amanda freed her hand and tried petting my leg again. “Do you mind?”

“Don't like being pet?” She asked.

“I do, but I only let some people do it. People who ask.”

“May I pet you?”

“Yes, you may.” I leaned over and laid my head in Amanda's lap. She ran her hand lovingly down my back.

John cleared his throat loudly. “I think your going a little far.” He said sternly.

I stood up sharply. “Then what isn't to far? What do you want?”

“I want to see you wearing something. What do you think you are? An animal?”

“Technically, I am. I prefer to wear a shirt, believe me. I just find it uncomfortable sometimes, like when I'm trying to sleep or when I go hunting. I really don't want to argue about it. Also, you didn't say anything when you met my sister.”

“Your sister wasn't sleeping in her front yard like a drunk, nor did she lay across my daughter's lap and ask to be pet. The only reason I brought anything up in the yard was because I didn't want you to think that I thought you were drunk.”

“Your forgetting that I can read thoughts and that I have no control over it. I haven't been drunk in years. The last time I had alcohol at all was just a sip of rum a few days ago. Also, I have no interest in your daughter in any way. I am about as interested in her as you are to my mother. If you want to pet me than you can ask.”

“Well, I'm sorry I called you an animal. Just... clothing would make you seem a little more civilized.”

I snorted loudly. “Civilized, huh? So, should I wear a white dress shirt, black slacks and wire rimmed glasses? Maybe change my name to something a little more common, like John?”

“Very funny. Maybe I should dye my hair red and paint my hands black. Then, I'll go and hunt little animals in the forest and eat almost raw meat.”

“Yeah, have fun with that. But it's be a little weird to see a reasonably smart human acting that way. Why are we arguing anyway? I hate to argue. Where have you been the past few days?”

“We've been getting ready for school.” Amanda said coldly.

“School? This time of year?” I asked.

“Yesterday was the first of September.” She replied.

“Really? It's the middle of March here!” I exclaimed.

“Dad, can we move here?”

“You'd still have to go to school eventually.” John said. He finished off the water in his glass and set it on the floor. I laid sideways on my back across my chair with my head towards John. He reached over and scratched my ears.

“You didn't ask.”

“I thought you wanted to be pet.”

“No, I just wanted to be comfortable.” I said as I sat up in the chair again.

“Well, do you mind me petting you?”

“Don't you think it'd be a little 'inappropriate'?” I said as I laid across the chair again, this time on my stomach.

“What's this?” John asked as he held my long black dagger in his hand.

“That's the knife I was telling you about. It was my father's mother's.”

“It's not very sharp.” John said as he ran his finger along the blade. When he got to the end, his finger shot into his mouth.

“The tip is. Cut yourself?” John nodded vigorously. “I should have told ya.”

“Don't mention it. Here, you can have it back.” He watched me put it in its usual place. “The holster blends in with your fur pretty well.”

“I don't have a holster, it's under my skin.”

“Doesn't that hurt?”

“It did at first, but that was a good... gosh, almost thirty years ago. Yeah, it hurt a lot. It feels strange not having it there now.”

“Oh, pleasant. But why?”

“You know how I was telling you about being taught to ignore pain. That has a lot to do with it.” John scratched between my ears a bit then felt a deep scar on my back.

“What's this?”

“I fell on an iron fence when I was five. The spike went right between my heart and my lung. Severed two ribs. That's probably the most painful thing I've ever been through.” John put his hand

back in his lap. He put his cut finger and the stained sleeve it was wrapped in into his mouth. "You can't see it but if you feel right there, you can tell I'm missing the ribs. There's just a piece of metal there." John stroked my back with his free hand. He ran his fingers through the carefully bent metal strip that perfectly replaced the two bones.

"That's... fascinating."

"You know, I'm telling you all these things about me but I know so little about you. I mean, I can tell that you like asking questions and just knowing random trivia. I can tell your pretty judgmental but you don't speak it. Which is good."

"You can read thoughts?"

"Yeah."

"Your whole family can?"

"Every Giant Fox can."

"So, if your family knows what I think of them or what anyone thinks of them, why don't they say anything about it?"

"Because, for one, people can change. For two, acting out won't get you very far in life. And three, we don't really care. It's just what we're taught when we're young. I know what you thought of me when we first met and I know what you thought of me the last time we spoke and I know what you think of me now. Two out of three aren't pleasant. But I ignore it, because that's what I'm taught. That's what I'll teach my children, if I ever have any."

"I bet your children will be really cute." Amanda interrupted, trying to change the subject.

"Yep. When we were born, news reporters always followed my mother, trying to get a few pictures. When Holiday had her little ones, she went into hiding for months."

"How are your parents?" John asked.

"Good, good. Like I said, my father found out I can heal the color-blind. He's been enjoying that. Last I heard, they were just wallowing in the benefits of retirement."

"What did your parents do?" Amanda asked.

"Uh, well, my father was an actor. He mostly did commercials. My mother went to school to be a mechanic and an architect. She also minored in cooking. My father won't admit it but, she is a much better cook than he is, she's just too lazy. She still works at the high school as a wood shop teacher, for fun more than anything else. But that's not really important. Why don't you want to talk about yourself?"

"Because I don't do anything wonderful or fascinating--"

"Got that right." Amanda butted in.

"But you, your... something that my world has never seen. Your world is in the distant future, and it's in my library. Me, I get up in the morning, go to work, come home and go to bed. Nothing happens."

"Well, it's the summer still. So, your not working. Surely something happened this summer."

"Well, you'll never believe me, but there is this door that goes to a mystical world in my library."

"Oh, come on. Why are you living in that house? Who were your parents, who are your co-workers? Give me something."

"Well, my father passed on about six months ago and left me the house. He was a millionaire but left all the money to my brother who probably spent it all on a life time supply of moonshine. That was his little summer home that he never visited. My mother lives at the other end of our country and I haven't heard from her in a good twenty years. I had a fiancée but she ran off with another. Outside of that, I'm just a lonely old man who lives with his daughter in a great big old house that a hateful old geezer left me." I could tell that a lot of hatred and emotion that he had buried for years was coming up as he spoke. He finished off by stamping his feet on the ground. He forgot about the crystal glass he had set there and was startled when he heard it crunch.

“Oh.” I decided that that was a good time to shut up.

“Oops.”

“Don't worry, it was from the dollar store.” I said, knowing that it was actually an antique. None the less, I paid less than a dollar for it.

“That woman was evil.” Amanda said, recalling the time when John had a girlfriend. “I can't believe you asked her to marry you.” She said to her father.

“I have a hard time believing it myself.” He said. He picked up a crystal shard from the floor. He felt the intricate flower pattern engraved in the glass.

“What she do?” I asked.

“That, I really don't want to talk about.”

“I don't either.” Amanda added.

“Sooo...” I started “Where'd you live before your father passed on?”

“In an apartment. Nowhere special. Where did you live before this place?”

“We're talking about you, stay focused.” I said.

“It's getting late, we should get going.” Jon said, looking at his pocket watch.

“It's only the afternoon, we can eat lunch or something.”

“No, we've over stayed our welcome. I'm sure you have other things to attend to.”

“Not really, no.”

“We should go,” Amanda said “we had to talk with school counselors.”

“Alright, well have a good day.” I said. John tried to open the door but found it locked. I stood up and opened it for him. I always thought they were strange people. Thoughts can be read, memories cannot; though, if I could look into the past of those two I'm sure I'd wish I hadn't. I watched them go down the path and onto the street. After I was sure they had reached the door I walked down the path. I hobbled around on three of my four limbs when I reached the edge of the forest near my home. After hunted for about an hour or two and being very unsuccessful, I lost track of where I was until I heard the river nearby. I followed the sound until I found the source. It was a wide, shallow part of the river that ran through Shingle Falls. I waded about a foot from the edge and took a drink. I looked up and saw something unusual. A female Giant Fox who was partially hidden behind the tall grass on the far bank of the river. Her coat was mostly white but with patches of red, brown, even gray and blue. The best way I can describe it is that she looked like a kid who lost a paint ball war and was covered in a rainbow of paint patches. Her short skirt swayed in the water below her. She looked up and made eye contact with me. Her eyes were a light brown with black specs thrown in randomly. Her stomach was round and plump.

“Evenin'!” I shouted over the river.

“Can I help you?” She asked.

“Touch her and die, Red!” A voice came from a tree.

“Who might you be?” I asked.

“I might ask the same question.” I saw the speaker move. I had a clear view of his head. He was a large Giant Fox, probably about twice my size. His fur was a light red and his eyes a pale yellow. What was most fascinating were his ears. They seemed like long, thin antennae that protruded from his head.

“Berk,” The female on the ground said “what on earth makes you think I'm yours? Just wondering.”

The male's face became very sad. “Nothin' I guess. Anyway, who are ya friend?”

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes you.”

“I'm Flechmen Foxwood.”

“No your not,” the female said “Flechmen is albino and old.”

“I'm his son. Mind if I ask who you are and how you know my father?”

“My name is Shaleeana (Shal-ee-on-ah),” she said “but everyone calls me Sweet Pea.” She sat in the water at the edge of the river and signaled me to come over. The water was slow moving and easy to cross. When I got close to Sweet Pea, the big male jumped from the tree and stood behind her. The fur on his chest and stomach was white but he was pitch black from about the center of his body down except for the white tip on his bushy tail. With his black shirt, it looked like only his head had any color. He glared at me angrily.

“What's the trouble bud?” I asked as I reached the other bank.

“He thinks I'm his because he was the only male around when I was in heat.” Sweet Pea rolled her colorful eyes idly.

“Right, well. What did you say your name was?” I asked.

“Berk, but sometimes they call me Big Berk.”

“Nice to meet ya. Mind if I ask how you know my father?”

“Saw him in an advertisement once, I can't remember what for.” Sweet Pea scratched her head. She rubbed her stomach and groaned quietly. Berk went up to her and put his hand on her shoulder. She punched upwards with all her strength. Berk yelped and jumped backwards.

“I think I pierced my lip.” He said through blood stained teeth.

“Pity, I was hoping to really hurt you.” Sweet Pea cleaned her hand in the river. I sat in the water and made sure to keep my distance. “Mind if I ask what happened to you?” She said to me.

“Err... nothing. Got caught in machinery. Mind if I ask how many children your carrying?”

“Six. Pretty typical litter.” She laid in the water and watched it flow over her hands.

“Got names for 'em yet?”

“No, I'm no good with names. I have a history of not being very successful with bearing children, so I try not to get attached.”

“That's too bad. My mother was the same way, she had one successful litter out of, I think, five.”

“Lucky her, I have three successful little ones out of maybe twenty. What's sad is that I'm the last female of my breed that's able to have children. I guess it's a good thing the three children I do have are all daughters.”

“I've never seen a fox like you before, you must be a pretty rare breed.”

Sweet Pea laughed slightly. “According to science, I'm extinct. Same with Berk, he's pretty rare himself.”

“Yeah, he's a Canam fox isn't he?”

“Yes! I am!” Berk called from his place in the tree. “And Sweet Pea is a Tirrian.”

“Tell everyone why don't you!” She called to him.

“What? It's obvious from your markings. Let me guess, your a Mountain Red, right?” He asked me.

“Yep. Hey, you know what time it is?” I asked.

“Time for lunch, if you ask me.”

“It's always time for lunch with you, Berk.” Sweet Pea snapped at him.

“It's one 'o clock.” He put his watch back in his shirt pocket.

“I should go,” I said “it's been nice meeting you, I hope we meet again.”

“Oh, I'm sure we will.” Sweet Pea smiled as she watched me cross the river again. When I reached home I got a towel from my bathroom and dried off. I laid on my over sized bed to sleep but was disturbed by an uncontrollable urge to scratch. Upon closer inspection I saw the offending flea. After digging through a desk drawer I pulled out a thin leather collar. A few drops of repelling liquid and I put it around my neck. The scratching went away almost instantly. Again, nothing overly exciting happened over the next few days until Friday. Friday was an exciting day, very strange. It started out normal enough. I sat on my roof that morning, watching the sun come through the trees and warm the land. I heard a car pull up in front of my house, then a door opening and closing. I didn't turn to look

until I heard heavy knocking on my front door.

“Up here!” I called.

“Can you come down here?” The tough voice of The Guard called from below.

“Give me a minute.” I took a last sip of tea then headed down through the tunnels and secret passages in my home then fell from the ceiling and onto my bed. I put on a dress shirt and opened the front door.

“Good morning Mr. Foxwood.” The Guard said in a cold, emotionless voice.

“Good mornin' to you sir. Are you taking me somewhere?”

“Indeed; come.” The Guard signaled me to follow. He had come in the same fancy car as before. Opening the door, he motioned for me to step inside. He followed me in and shut the door. “I have something for you to try.” He handed me a tall glass filled with a brownish liquid and a paper umbrella in the top.

I took a sip of the contents. “That's pretty good. What is it?”

“Long Island Iced Tea. I thought you might like it. It does have alcohol in it though.”

“I guess I'll only have one then.” I said and took another sip of the drink. The car started and drove off. It was another long car trip that lasted into the afternoon.

In the middle of nowhere, where we were surrounded completely by forest, The Guard looked over to me. “Do you mind if we stop by a wedding later this evening?”

“Not at all. Who's?”

“My nephew. He's a nice guy, you'd like him.”

“Don't mind at all. Just get me home before it's too late.”

“We'll be back by midnight.” The driver commented. We continued driving for a few hours.

Y.I.M.T was a pretty new school. The building was made mostly of glass, the sun could be seen shining straight through it. Gardens flourished with flowers of every color. A finely dressed woman with flowing brown hair and sparkling gray eyes greeted The Guard and myself when the car pulled up.

“Good afternoon, you must be Mr. Foxwood.” She said in a sweet, homely voice.

“Indeed I am. I hope you don't mind Mr. Dark-and-Scary following us.” The Guard looked at me strangely.

“Only if you do sir. My name is Dr. Killings.” We shook hands. She looked over me quickly and made mental notes.

“What a lovely name.” I commented.

“Yeah, I know...” She rolled her eyes idly. “Come on inside, I'll show you around.” The grounds of the school were mostly thick, healthy grass with the occasional fruit trees. Flower beds lined the walls of the building and adorned the windowsills. The inside of the building had solid wood floors and large windows. Well dressed students walked by and said hello. On one of the upper floors, two other doctors met up with us. One of them was a thin young woman with short blond hair and was dressed in a long, white doctor's coat. The other doctor was a young man who I had met before. He was slightly chubby and had short, spiked hair. He seemed to always have a smile on his face.

“Well, good afternoon sir.” The young man said to me.

“Mr. Foxwood,” Dr. Killings began “this is Dr. Lynch,” she indicated the young lady “and Dr. Heckyle.”

“Nice to meet you all.” I said.

“These two will be performing the operation, should you decide to have it done.” Killings told me.

“Do you mind if we run a few tests?” Dr. Lynch asked me.

“Not at all.” I was lead by the three doctors into one of the few doors that wasn't made of glass. It lead to a corridor that was lined with numbered doors. We entered through one of the doors to a well lit room with a padded table in the middle.

“Why don't you have a seat.” The ever-happy Dr. Heckyle indicated the table. I sat down and

almost instantly had three doctors on me. One looked into my ears and eyes, another looked at my teeth and the third looked over my body and paid special attention to my left arm.

“Are you on any medication?”

“Not any more, no.” I replied.

“Have you or your family had a history of problems?”

“Not that I know of, no.”

“Do you have any allergies?”

“Not really.”

There was some chit-chat between them I didn't understand.

“You look to be in good shape sir.” Dr. Heckyle helped me from the table.

“Who don't you come with us and we can do a few extra tests.” Dr. Killings signaled for me to follow her. We walked further down the corridor.

“Have you done an MRI scan before?” Dr. Lynch asked.

“Yeah, a few.” I said with a slight laugh. We walked into a room and I was instructed to lay on the table in the center. A short time after the test had been run, the three doctors came back into the room.

“It looks like our only option might be surgery.” Dr. Killings said with a frown on her face.

“Would you want to go through that?” Dr. Lynch asked.

“Well, err,” The Guard gave me a “you better” look. “Yeah, I guess.”

“We need a definite 'yes' or 'no' before we can do anything.” The ever energetic Dr. Heckyle told me.

I took a deep breath and thought for a moment. Something in my mind was urging, “say yes, say yes!”

“Yes, I will.”

“Alright!” Heckyle clapped his hands in joy.

“Why don't you go with these two and I'll get the necessary paperwork” Dr. Killings said as she left the room. Lynch and Heckyle took me around and ran all sorts of tests. After about an hour or so, we went back to the foyer of the school. Dr. Killings was waiting with a tablet computer.

“Why don't you look over this and sign at the bottom.” She said as she handed me the device.

“I feel like I'm gonna break it.” I read through the document for a while. “Whats this about donations?”

“If you donate yourself to us then we can skip over a lot of red tape.” Killings said as she watched me carefully.

“That sounds like a pretty good tax right off.” I joked. I read through the rest of the document, making sure to take in every detail. Killings handed me the special pen to sign with.

“Are you sure you understand everything?”

“Yep.” I signed the tablet and handed it back. “One more thing, I thought you might want to look at this.” I handed her my death certificate.

A smile came across her face. “That's pretty funny.” She handed it back to me. I said good bye to the other doctors as she escorted The Guard and myself to the door. “We'll give you a call when we have everything ready. I'd like to see you back in about two weeks. We just have to brush up on some lessons and discuss the best way to go about this.”

“Well, thank you ma'am.” I said as I walked off to the car. We drove a short distance to a small church. Tables and chairs were set up in the field next to the church. People stood around and talked idly. The car drove over the lawn and parked behind the church. The Guard and I walked out and looked for the pastor. The Guard recognized someone from the crowd.

“Hey, are we late?”

“No, we're starting in fifteen minutes.” The man walked off and went back to his own business. People started to sit in the chairs a few minutes later. The Guard and I sat next to a man who was

dressed very sharply. He always had his hand clenched around his pocket and an almost frightened look on his face. I saw the butt of a hand gun in his pocket when he sat down. The ceremony started with a tall, young man under a gazebo.

“Everyone have a seat, we'll get going in just a moment.” He said. A very old man came up to the younger and gave him a warm hug. Organs from inside the church played the march loud enough to be heard outside. A little girl threw flowers before the bride. Her groom read his vows and she read hers. I saw the man sitting next to me grip his gun firmly. I managed to pull out the clip of bullets without him noticing.

“Does anyone here object to these two wonderful young people joining in holy matrimony?” The old pastor asked aloud. This is what made this an interesting day. The man sitting next to me stood up and pointed his gun at the bride.

“Yeah! I do. Die b...”

Click, click.

“Looking for this?” I held up the clip for him to see. He made a motion to strike me but fell short with a bang. The assassin had been assassinated. People started running and screaming everywhere. One enormously fat man stood in the center of the aisle.

“Everyone SIT!” He yelled. Surprisingly, everyone listened and the ceremony continued with and air of extreme discomfort. During the couples first dance, the enormous man came up to me. “Hello there friend.” I had an uneasy feeling about him.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“I owe you the world, friend. You save my daughter's life. In exchange I want to do something.”

“Like what?”

“You, and your family, will forever be under the protection of the Mafia.” My heart sank when he said this.

“Well, uh, (he he) that won't do much good. I live in Shingle Falls.”

“Not a problem friend. Mr. Marks is the leader there, he owes me big. What's your name friend?”

“Fah- Flechmen. Flechmen Foxwood.”

“I will take care of you Mr. Foxwood. You have a good day.” He picked me up in a crushing hug then set me back on the ground. The Guard had been standing behind him, giving me a “we need to go” look.

“Well, uh, nice meeting you. But I should go, really.”

“Farewell Flechmen.”

It was late in the evening when I got home. After being dropped off in front of my house, I walked to the closest fast food restaurant. After placing an order, the clerk looked at me strangely.

“Dude,” he said “you've been deactivated.”

“What?” I asked.

“Yeah, uh, it says your RFID chip has been deactivated because the owner is deceased. Tough luck man.”

“Well, nuts. Could I dig up some cash and come back?”

“Dude, are you serious? Printed money hasn't been around for a good ten years, why would you even have cash any more?”

“In case something like this happened. Can I pay you back later?”

“Well, uh, you could if you had a membership but you can't get one with a dead chip dude.”

“I mean, can you buy it for me and I'll pay *you* back later.”

“I'd get fired for sure dude. You should leave, I think police are automatically contacted when something like this happens.”

“Thanks anyway.” I turned and walked towards the door.

“Thank you for eating at McFries, I hope you have a merriment filled day!” He turned and

walked into the kitchens. “Whatever.”

I kept walking out the door but was stopped by a police officer. “Mind commin' with me bud?” She asked.

“Um, why?”

“Your under arrest for attempted identity theft. I'll add insubordination to that if you want.”

In the station, the police chief looked at me strangely. “You really expect me to believe that story?” He asked. His chubby hand wrapped its self around a steaming coffee mug and lifted it to his fat face.

“That's the truth sir.” I said and leaned back in the chair.

“I don't suppose you have proof.” The chief raised an eyebrow.

“Uh, well,” I pulled the death certificate from my shirt pocket “I have this.”

“You expect me to believe this is real?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have any witnesses?”

“Yes, my parents and a good friend.”

The officer raised hi eyebrow again. “Lock him up boys.”

Two burly officers escorted me roughly to a prison cell. I watched through the bars as they walked away. A voice from behind me sent chills up my spine. “Hey there foxy.” I turned to see the woman rightly named “Big Bertha.”

“Haven't they sent you to a different prison yet?”

“Nope. Come here, we've got some unfinished business...”

“HELP!”

...Moving on...

In the windowless prison complex, it was impossible to tell it was morning. The only indication was the sound of high powered lights coming on. I could only see my own shadow from where I was. That's all I really wanted to see. At the other end of the cell I could hear Bertha running a comb through her greasy black hair. The cell filled the smell of stale roses and violets with every spray of her perfume. “Had fun last night?” She asked innocently. I still sat cowering in the corner, watching my shadow dance on the wall. “Whats the matter with you?” She came up to me and tapped my shoulder.

“Don't touch me.” I said quivering.

“Fine then.” She walked back to her bed and sat on it. “So, have a wife, kids?”

“Why?”

“Just trying to make a conversation.”

“No. Why do you do this? At night your one way and in the morning your Little-Miss-Perfect.”

“Cause the guards don't go around at night. The only reason I'm still here is 'good behavior'.

But some people know better. Quick, stand up here comes a guard.”

An officer tapped the bars with his nightstick. “Foxwood, come on out, you made bail.”

“I did? How?”

“Doesn't matter, just get out. We need the space.”

I stood slowly and waled out the open door. The officer was escorting a very large man that looked very terrifying. The officer pointed me down to the end of the complex. Waiting on the other side of the large double doors that served as the exit was a sleek black car with dark tinted windows. A man in a black suit and dark sun glasses held open the door, reviling the red felt interior. I turned to walk away but the man holding the door stopped me.

“This ride's for you bud.”

I turned and looked at him. “Why?”

“Just get in the car.”

“No, I'll just walk.” I turned away from him again and started walking. He ran up to me and and grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Your coming with us." I tried to get away but he was too strong. He shoved me into the car and shut the door. Another man in a black suit with gray stripes sat across from me in the car. He was much smaller than the other but gave me a very uneasy feeling.

"Good morning Mr. Foxwood." He said in a smooth tone with a hint of a strange accent.

"Whats going on?" I snarled.

"We're giving you a ride home." He tapped the glass that separated us from the driver. "Thirteen thirteen Dead End drive, unit A."

"Who are you?" I demanded angrily.

"Whoa, temper temper. You can call me Rodney, Rodney Marks."

I recognized the name. Things started to make sense. "Your the Mafia?"

"You could say that. Come now, relax. We're going to take you home nothing more. No one should be with strangers on their birthday, and your no exception."

"How do you know today's my birthday?"

"We know a lot of things. As for you, I was doing a lot of research last night. Giant Foxes are fascinating creatures. No, hear me out. I thought it was strange that foxes aren't social at all but Giant Foxes go crazy if they're not around anyone for a long time. You live longer than humans too, that must be nice. You even have a higher mental capacity, very strange. I didn't look into mating rituals or anything but I saw that your born in litters of five to six. Normal foxes usually have four or five."

"Can we stop with the review? I know all this, my mother wrote the book. But why did you pay my bail to get me out of prison?"

"Pay? Ha! No, we just walked in and said 'we want you to release Mr. Foxwood.'"

"Then take me back, I don't want to be out illegally."

"Illegal? No, no. You see, we're above the law. And you are too, now. The police answer to us." He leaned in close to me. "And, well, the Mafia in Shingle Falls isn't like other parts of the world. We try not to kill people for no reason. I think it's been a good ten years since we sent someone away, and the only reason we did was because he had a gun to my head. I think it's just the record of the Global Mafia that keeps people afraid of us." He sat back in his seat and talked loudly so the driver would hear him. "I think we just *passed* your house Mr. Foxwood." The driver slammed the brakes and made the car stop quickly. He turned around and mumbled to himself. Rodney leaned over to me again. "So hard to find good help these days. Am I right?"

"Yeah... Just drop me off here, I'll be fine."

"You sure? Alright, stop the car Mugs." The car slowly came to a rest only a short distance from my house. As I walked away, Rodney called out "Anytime you need our services, we'll be waiting." The door of the car shut and the vehicle drove off. It sent a chill down my back, I don't know why. I was comforted by the sweet, homely voice of an elderly neighbor.

"There you are!" She called as she walked to me with a tin full of cookies. She was a sweet old lady. I believe she was half elf, she had the ears for it anyway. Her long gray hair was arranged in a neat bun and her flowered gown swayed around her legs as she walked towards me. (Don't get me wrong, it was kind of disturbing.)

"Morning grandma."

At the same moment, she put the tin in my arms and grabbed me in a warm hug. "Good morning Flechmen. Where have you been? You've been disappearing for days at a time."

"Oh, I've been lots of places."

"You look sleepy, you should go lay down and take a nap."

"Wonderful idea grandma. Thanks for the cookies."

"Oh, anything for my grandson. You have a nice nap now." We walked off in different directions waving to each other. She was always somewhat of a mystery to me. I think she saw me as the grandson she wished she had. I met her grandchildren later, not pleasant people at all. I'll get into that later though.

Before I had the chance to open my front door, a news van parked in front of my house. I ignored it and walked inside. A knock on the door disturbed my pleasant nap on my couch. I opened the door slightly and stared into the news camera.

“Mr. Foxwood?” A young woman in a fancy violet suit with a microphone tried to open the door further.

“Can I help you?”

“Would you mind doing a short interview?”

“What for?”

“We want to be the first news cooperation to get a story on the 'modern day Jesus'.”

“Well, He ain't here.”

“Are you Flechmen Foxwood?”

“Yes, but I'm not Jesus by any means. And I will not be interviewed as a 'modern day Jesus' because I think that's offensive. Where on earth did you get a name like that for me?”

“You were killed by a brain tumor and you came back to life three days later, that's-”

“It was four days, and I really don't think I was entirely dead. Maybe really close to death. Close enough for my soul to leave but not dead enough to rot. I saw Jesus, and I'm not Him, so don't call me that.”

“Pardon me Mr. Foxwood. Can we interview you as a brain tumor survivor?”

“No, I still have it. My nightmare isn't over yet. You can interview me as just Flechmen Foxwood.”

“Alright, err... Start the camera.”

This is just a copy of the transcript of the interview.

Leslie: I'm here today with Flechmen Foxwood who as cheated death and lived to tell. Mr. Foxwood, why do you think you survived being thought dead for three days?

Foxwood: Well, it was four days. The only reason I'm still here is because God still has plans for me.

Leslie: What do you think those plans might be?

Foxwood: I have no idea. I'll have to just wait and see.

Leslie: What was your families reaction to learning you were alive?

Foxwood: Well, they were shocked to say the least.

Leslie: How did you feel when you woke up?

Foxwood: Hungary, a little panicked. It was confusing, I didn't really know what to think.

Leslie: How did it feel being so close to death?

Foxwood: Wonderful. It's such a peaceful feeling.

Leslie: Now, some people claim to see things when they have near death experiences. Did you see anything?

Foxwood: Funny you should ask. I walked right up to the gates of Heaven. I saw my entire funeral and everything from above.

Anyway, it continued on like that for about ten minutes or so. I don't really want to type the whole thing out. (I ask for the transcript and all they can give me is the hard copy...) After the news crews left I sat on my couch again. I didn't even get to close my eyes before another knock came on the door.

“Come in!” I shouted.

Will cracked the door open. “Not feeling well?”

“What gave you that idea?”

“You usually answer the door unless you're not feeling well.”

“I'm not. What do you want?”

“Well, your family is out here and so is Rex. But we can leave.”

“The last thing I want right now is company. Later, maybe.”

“Alright, I understand.”

“Thank you.”

Will left and my mother threw the door open shortly after. She picked me up and stared for a moment. “You look like crap.”

“{Leave me alone! I don't feel good.}”

“{You don't look good. What happened last night?}”

“{I don't want to talk about it. Just leave me alone!}”

“{I'm your mother, you can tell me-}”

I wrapped my hand around her muzzle. “{Leave me alone, I don't want to talk about it.}”

“[{Alright, we'll leave you alone. Let us know when you feel better.}]”

“Thank you.”

The company hesitated, then were shoed out the door by my mother. I sat back on my couch, fell over, and was quickly asleep.

A heavy knock rang through the main room of my home. In a daze, I ignored it. The knock came again.

“I'm not home.” I said half to myself. Again, the knock came. About ten minutes went by with almost constant knocking. Hastily, I opened the door. A group of about ten people dressed in white linen were kneeling behind a short man in a white robe. He seemed to be the leader. Upon seeing me, he looked down and presented me with a basket of fruit.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“Oh Magnificent Beast, please accept this offering and allow us to speak with thee.”

I tried hard not to laugh, but failed. “Excuse me? Ha! Who you callin' a magnificent beast? Haha! You must be nuts!”

The leader looked at me with big, sad eyes. “You do not accept our gift?”

“Ha-ha! Oh-ho! You are too much! Where are the hidden cameras? This can't be real.”

“Magnificent Beast, we have no tricks. We have come to honor you with our blessing and ask if we can honor you further with a living sacrifice.”

“Pffft! I don't want a sacrifice! Okay, now you're scaring me.”

“We don't wish to make a sacrifice to *you*. We come to ask if we may honor you by presenting you before the god-”

Slam! I wish I could have seen the look on his face when the door almost whacked him. He was determined though. A knocked boomed through the room. I opened the door only to see the bizarre cult leader staring at me with his big blue eyes.

“Do you not wish to be honored?”

“You want to honor me by sacrificing me to your god?”

“In a sense, yes. Well, it will be a large feast in your honor before you are taken to the alter and laid to rest.”

“Uh...”

“You will be taken quickly and we will try our best to honor your religion's burial practice with your remains.” I starred at him blankly. “It will be somewhat of a party and your friends may com to pay last respects or however you may wish to do things according to your beliefs. So long as your final moments are on the alter.”

“No. No, never. God has me here for a reason and that reason isn't to die for you. There are laws in place that say you can't harm a giant fox.”

“If you come willingly, the law is null and void. We have researched this thoroughly.” At this point, it became more of a game for me.

“So, you say I will be taken quickly. What do you mean?”

“The entire ceremony will take but a few hours. You will be set upon the table and served before spending your last moments on the alter.” The way he said 'served' bothered me (hence the

underline).

“Care to elaborate? What would I be served?”

“On glass plates with a lemon sauce and bread pudding for desert.”

“What would be served with lemon sauce? Pork, chicken; I'm fond of beef.”

“Well, uh... you.”

“You want to eat *me*?”

“Well, err... yes, in a way.”

“But you want me to be alive until the end?”

“Well, yes.”

“That doesn't sound fun. How do you plan on eating me, err, uh, serving me.”

“We would take as we need and before your passing we would take what was left to the alter and let the gods do as they will.”

I looked at him strangely for a moment. He shifted from one foot to another uneasily. “Get off my porch.”

“I understand this is a difficult question to answer and we will give you your time to think on it.”

“My answer is no! Now get off my porch!”

An abnormally large man in a black suit had come up behind the leader unnoticed. He put a large hand around the leader's neck. “Is this man bothering you Mr. Foxwood?” He asked in a low, gruff voice.

“He is.”

The leader looked timidly up at the captor. “What do you wish of me?”

The man looked to me. “You want him to sleep with the fishes in the river?”

“I don't want you to kill him.”

“Just knock him around a bit, teach him a lesson?”

The leader looked at me with begging eyes. “Don't let him hurt me, I only wanted to honor you.” He squeaked.

“Who are you?” I asked the larger man.

“I'm from the mafia, I'm supposed to protect you. When this clown started talkin' about eating you I thought some action should be taken.”

The leader gulped, he knew I held his fate in my hand. “I'll tell you what,” I said. “There is a church on Tealcan Drive, talk to the pastor and take his message to heart. Do that, and I will let you live. Come here and ask to sacrifice me again and I'll have my friend put you on the alter. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” The leader squeaked. The large man released his grip around the leader's neck. The entire company fled with fright.

Once they were gone, the big man looked to me. “Whenever you need the services of the mafia, just holler. Chances are, there will be someone around.”

“Thank you. Err, do you want something to drink?”

“No, thank you Mr. Foxwood. I'll let you get abouts your business.” With that he walked back to a car concealed behind trees and bushes. I walked back inside, all I could thin of was how bizarre the whole event had been. I looked into it the next day at the library because I was curious of what would have happened to me. The cult had been around for a long time and tried to make sacrifices to their gods once a year or so. Giant foxes were thought to be the most holy of sacrifices but the gods seemed to settle for humans as well. I found an interesting book on the religion that showed some graphic photographs of festivities in the past. Humans and foxes alike skinned alive and eaten before being burned on the alter. Honestly, I couldn't read beyond the fifth page because of one photograph. According to the author, the festivities had stopped mid way when his presence was discovered. The leader and the followers scattered leaving everything behind. I skipped a few pages until I saw something they left behind. I thought the picture was to hideous to look at but I still studied it. A form

seemed so familiar yet so strange in its mangled form. On the next page it explained the photograph a little more. The author wrote: "Amongst the food and drink that had been left behind, I thought I saw something move. Something still alive. I could tell it wasn't human by the shape of its head and it's back covered in fur..." It described it a little further. "I managed to rescue the beast and bring it to a hospital. Doctors were doubtful but they tried their best and were successful. The creature, named **Layleka of Fox Woods**, was the first, and to my current knowledge, the only one of her kind to survive being partially skinned..." I have to say, that was the last thing I would have expected to see in that book. This had happened long before I was born and even before my mother had decided to live with humans. I believe she was about fifteen at the time. She had told my siblings and I about her past but was always so vague... Ugh, I'm rambling, forgive me. I just thought it was so weird. While I was reading peacefully, someone came up behind me and set their hand on my back. I turned to see a rather mad looking librarian.

"No dogs allowed!" She whispered angrily and pointed to a sign.

"If I see any, I'll let you know."

"I mean you, sir."

"I'm not a dog."

"I realize that but the rule still applies. There are people who may be allergic and I can't have them sneezing and making so much noise. And you are getting fur all over my lovely couch!" I thought it was a rather hideous couch, but to each their own.

"My father worked here, no one had a problem with him."

"That may have been then, but the rules are strictly followed now."

"Well, fine. Is there somewhere else I could go?"

"Search online."

"I don't have a computer, and I probably never will."

"That's your problem, now out!" With that I set the book on a table and left. It was a lovely spring day out. People went in and out of shops, the aroma of bakery filled one street, there was even a lively baseball game in a cleared out lot. I don't think I could ever forget the lady who was walking her ferret down the street. Sitting on my porch when I got home was a worn leather case that I knew was Will's. It had a tag on it that simply said "For Flechmen". I knew what was in the case but was unsure of why Will would let it go. I picked it up and brought it inside. After getting comfortable in my folding chair, I pulled out the battered and beaten laptop computer from the case. It had a note attached to it that read: "Happy belated birthday. I'm sorry I couldn't get you something better but it's the thought that counts, right? Don't let it become a major part of your life like I let it, you will regret it if you lose it!" I had no real use for the thing, I had only used a computer maybe once or twice. Those times, the thing was glitchy and seemed stupid and a hassle to use. With nothing better to do, I opened it and turned it on. After a while, it showed a plain blue background with a gray taskbar and black cursor in the middle of the screen. A brilliant red stuck pixel in the corner of the screen distracted me momentarily. An icon titled "Click on me!" was the next thing to catch my attention. Will had shown me how to use the mouse but it was sometimes difficult because the fur on my hands tended to separate my finger from the pad. The document gave simple instruction on how to connect to the Internet, make other documents, use a few programs, and so on. I read through it and understood most of it. Part of the file told how to connect to a wireless Internet connection and I discovered that one of my neighbors had wireless but didn't have it protected. After a few hours, I would say I knew quite a bit about computers and how to use them. I did feel a little bad about stealing my neighbors Internet connection though. It became late before I knew it. Will and Rex knocked on my door and I almost didn't notice. I stood up and unplugged the computer from its adapter and waded to the door.

"Hello, come on in." I said and stood aside for Will and Rex. Will looked at me and smiled.

"Have you been enjoying that?"

"Yeah, it's fun. Your little tutorial is easy to follow."

“Oh, did he give you that?” Rex asked.

“Mmhmm.” I nodded.

“Here, let me show you something.” He sat with me on the couch and instructed me to a web site. “Just click 'download'. Then we'll wait for- oh, your neighbors have fast Internet. Alright, click 'run'. Okay. Next... next... accept.... okay, cool. That's what we use at work, it make things a lot more secure. Oh, what do you have for anti virus? That's the thing with computers like this, you really have to protect them. So, now click on that new icon in the corner of the screen, yeah that one. Click up here, and... here, let me type it in. Okay, now click 'download' and click 'save file'. A bit different than before, right?”

“I guess. Now, what will this do?”

“It gets rid of any software that people can put on your computer to do bad stuff. You know, you should learn Linux, the less you know about computers to begin with, the easier Linux is.”

“What's Linux?”

“Like what you have now but better. If you know what you're doing you can make it do anything you want. But not with this, this can do what you want but it's susceptible to viruses and stuff. Okay, now that that's downloaded, double click here. Click next, agree-”

“Shouldn't I read this?”

“It doesn't matter, it just says 'don't modify the software or we'll sue your butt'. Click next, next, update now.”

“I fell kind of wrong using my neighbor's Internet for this though.”

“Is it protected? If it's not protected they are basically saying 'we have Internet and we don't care if you use it'. If it was protected and you hacked it, then it would be illegal.”

“Ah, okay.”

“You should get your own Internet connection though, I can help you set it up.”

“Alright, thanks Rex. Did you guys want dinner or anything?”

“No, just wanted to check up on you.” Will said, sipping a cup of coffee.

“Alright. Where did you get coffee?” I asked.

“I had it. Do you want some?” He produced a bottle from under his dress jacket.

“No, thanks. Oh, Rex, what's this?”

“Hmm? Whoa, what'd you do?”

“I don't know, the screen just changed suddenly.”

“Yeah, that's the Blue Screen of Death. That happens sometimes.”

“So, that's what the color blue looks like?”

“Yeah, didn't you know that? Oh, that's right, you were colorblind. Well, we can teach you colors.” Rex patted my back. I felt somewhat embarrassed because it was something I never could learn.

“Thanks. I think I could find what I need to know on my own.” I said.

“This might help you.” Will handed me what seemed like a small box wrapped in brown paper. Inside it was a very thick book of colored, transparent sheets of plastic with a white piece of paper behind each one that told the name of the color. I flipped through the thin, narrow pages and looked at the wide array of colors in the little book.

“Thanks Will.” I looked at the back of the book.

“Please do not use this book after 12/1/4088, the standards in color naming may have changed by then and this book will be updated.” The message on the back read.

“It's old.” I said to myself.

“Yeah, but I thought you might like it. You always used to collect weird things.” Will said.

A memory of the past popped into my head. I laughed about it slightly. “I never thought that would backfire on me.”

“Hmm?” Will raised one eyebrow.

“Remember that one time you two broke a bottle of concentrated pheromones on my head?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, that was funny!” Rex said with a laugh.

“I remember it all too well. Your mother was quite enraged.” Will said.

“Enraged? She was pissed! I thought she was going to kill us. You never did tell us what happened the rest of that week. Where were you?” Rex asked me.

“That doesn't matter.”

“But we we wanna know, don't we Will?”

“I don't want to talk about anything Flechmen is uncomfortable with.”

“Thank you, Will.” I said.

“Why did you have it anyway?” Rex asked.

“It was in a neat bottle. I wanted that more than the contents.” I told him.

“Weren't you going to make lunch or something?” Will asked.

“Can we just eat at your place?”

“That's fine.” Will said as he started for the door. He opened it just when the Winchester chime of the door bell echoed through the house.

“What now?” I muttered to myself.

Will looked down to the small man holding his bowler hat in his trembling hands.

“Are you Mr. Foxwood with the flat for rent?” He asked in his small voice.

I came up behind Will. Even I had to knell down to be level with the man's eyes. “I am.” His eyes got wide, almost terrified. I thought he might scream but a smile came over his face.

“Oh, wow! I thought your kind were a myth!”

“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“D- do you mind?” He reached out and touched my head. I pretended I was going to snap him but he took his hand back before I could even twitch.

“Well, you wanted an apartment?”

“Oh, eh... yes... if it's still available. You see, I found the ad in an old newspaper.”

“The original owners must have made it. Yeah, the apartment's still around. Just as long as you don't mind if the original owner was killed in there.”

“I – I'm not superstitious.”

“Okay, uh... you want to bite to eat first?”

“N – no, I ate before I left. Why?”

“We were, going out.”

“Oh, I didn't realize Shingle Falls allowed cross species relationships. None the less same-sex.”

“Gerr... I mean...”

“I'm married to a woman. Mr. Foxwood and I are simply long time friends.” Will said with an unusual calmness.

“I bet Flech was blushing under his fur at that one.” Rex chimed in from the couch.

“Don't mind him.” I said to the small man.

“I – I'm sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“Don't worry about it. Come on, I'll show you the apartment.”

The next few days were dull. Maybe even more dull than the rest of this book. Honestly, if you've read this far you are either obsessed with it or are as bored as I am. I promise, it does get better. Well, stranger anyway.

It was only Thursday afternoon when the escort came. Opening the door to find the Guard left me somewhat dumbfounded.

“Can I help you?”

“Your car is waiting.”

“I see that, but why?”

“Your car is waiting, come.”

“Alright, let me say good bye to my neighbor.” I turned and knocked on his door.

“Yes.” He let only the top of his head through the door.

“I’m gonna be gone for a while, I need you to watch the place.”

“Okay. Where you going.”

“Yong University for some treatment. I’ll be back in a few days probably.”

“Okay, hope you get well.” He went back into his house without a sound and shut the door. I don’t recall seeing that man again for several months.

The trip back to the university was quiet; I was nervous to say the least. I think the guard could smell it. He sat and stared forward the whole time, never flinching, never moving. I idly picked the loose fur from my leg and watched it drift down to the floor of the car.

“Lovely day to go kite flying,” the driver said in a frail voice.

“Too many trees,” I replied bluntly.

“Is the glass half full or half empty today Mr. Foxwood?”

“The glass is twice as big as it needs to be.”

“Touché.”

We pulled into the university, the gray clouds giving the glass building a luminescent silver color. Dr. Lynch greeted us. Without a word she took my hand, stroked the short fur softly and started walking towards the main building. I looked to see if the guard was following, but he was already back in the car.

I was trembling as I walked, praying to God for the strength to get through this. The doctor seemed all too happy, with her face nearly glowing in the bright sunlight before we entered the building.

“How are you today Mr. Foxwood?”

“I feel sick.” Well, I did...

“Don’t worry about it too much, you’ll be fine with us.” She assured me. Dr. Lynch brought out the tablet I had signed before and held it for me. “Well, your bloodwork showed that you were pretty drunk last time you were here. Not sure how your kind handles alcohol, but a human would have been out cold. So, we need you to re-read this before we can go on.”

“That’s odd,” I noted almost to myself as I read “I don’t think I had any... is there any alcohol in long island iced tea?”

Dr. Lynch just gave me an odd look, staring for a moment. “That’s almost pure alcohol...”

I nodded in understanding. I reached the bottom of the document and signed with the special pen. Lynch put the device back on the front desk and lead me around the halls and passages of the university.

We ended up at a large set of double doors, propped open with wooden wedges. Inside was a large, very well lit room with the stereotypical stainless steel table and various doctors instruments. As I walked into the room, I could see it was actually an auditorium. Near the ceiling, there was glass all around, behind was chairs full of people.

“What’s going on here?” I asked as I took a seat on the table.

“Well, since this is the first time most of us have even seen your kind, we decided to have it more of a public thing.” She replied. I didn’t much like this, but I didn’t have much of a choice.

Dr. Killings came into the room and shut the doors we had just come through. She came up to me, shook my hand and smiled.

“We’re very pleased to have you here Mr. Foxwood.” She said, there was a bit of a cheer in the audience.

“I guess it’s nice to be here” I replied.

Dr. Lynch started to prepare herself, snapping on rubber gloves as she talked idly to the audience. I felt like I was on a very technical cooking show. She came up to me and rubs around the

areas of my head, explaining what was to happen to the audience. I pressed my ears down in discomfort at what was being said.

“Aw..” Dr. Lynch said as she picked my ears up and played with them. The audience chuckled softly, she stopped when I let out a little growl.

Dr. Killings came up, changed into scrubs and rubber gloves. “The first thing we have to do, is prepare the patient. This would normally involve shaving the person's hair, I suppose today it will be shaving his fur.” This got another chuckle from the audience, I pushed my ears flat yet again.

Lynch put her hand on my shoulder, “Flech, are you alright?”

“I'm fine... just, not in a joking mood right now.”

“That's understandable, we're just trying to lighten the mood, none of us are very comfortable right now.” I nodded in response.

Dr. Killings came up in front of me, “Would you like to be sedated now?” I nodded in response to this as well. With a nod, both doctors got to work on figuring out how to take my blood pressure and attach a heart monitor. Apparently, its not quite like a dog, and not really like a human, but something in between. Took a moment to figure out.

“We will now have the patient lay on the table” Lynch said to the audience, giving me a hand signal to lay down on my stomach. I took a moment to make myself comfortable, sprawling out my legs as I rested my arms under my head. Killings came and showed an IV needle to the audience, then to me. There was a slight pinch in my scruff, and that's honestly the last thing I remember.

I think it was actually the next day, I sat and stared at the pillow of my bed for a moment. I felt stoned from the anesthesia. I sat and stared for what seemed like hours, my body becoming gradually more sore. As I gained more of my senses, I could tell it was day outside, the room was flooded with natural light. After I could make use of my sense of smell, I could tell there were fresh oranges in the room somewhere close to me. I didn't dare move yet, my body just felt so sore. After a few more hours, I felt a lot better. I moved my head left and right, as much as my stiff neck would let me. The oranges were on the nightstand, the sun was behind some trees. I reached up to feel my head, it seemed so sore, and felt my bald skin.

“Mmf.” was the noise I made. I moved my arms under the pillow and closed my eyes for a moment before Dr. Lynch came in.

“Hello Mr. Foxwood.”

“Mmf.”

“How are we feeling?”

“Mmf.”

“A little sore?”

“Mmf.”

“Well, I just had some news to share, if you'd like”

“Sure...”

“Well, we successfully removed everything that was a tumor. But, we're not sure exactly what it is. We don't think it was a brain tumor at all, because it was attacking the bone. So, possibly some kind of fox bone tumor that develops on the inside of the skull.”

“So, its fixed but you don't know what it is?”

“Exactly. It kinda threw us for a loop. When we opened your skull, most of the tumor came out with the piece of bone.”

“Is that good?”

“It's... odd. It means it was an easy surgery, easier anyway, but we flat out don't know what it is. We'd like to run more tests and see if it's prone to developing anywhere else in your body.”

“Ok,” I yawned and stretched out a bit, “Sounds like a plan.”

“You get plenty of rest now.” She pet down my back, giving me a little scratch where by tail should be. “Also, the robotics team wanted to chat with you. Not sure what they wanted.”

“Oh? Alright.”

With that, she left. I closed my eyes and was soon asleep. Not sure how long I was asleep, but I'm pretty sure it was the better part of that day.

The next day, I felt a lot better. A nurse had brought in a little cup of pain medication, but I hadn't touched it. In the afternoon, a tall, skinny man with wild black hair and thick glasses came in.

He pulled up a chair, opened a laptop computer then looked up to me. After a minute he reached out and stroked down my back.

“Such beautiful creatures your kind are.” He said softly.

“Thanks. Can I help you?”

“Maybe. I'm from the robotics team. May I see your... um... paw?”

“My feet?”

“Well, what do you call your hands? Are they paws too?”

“No, just hands.” I held out my right hand for him. He grasped it firmly and rubbed, feeling each bone and soft pad from the palm and out on each individual finger.

“Your fur is very soft.” He noted as he continued. He moved his attention up along my arm, gently squeezing and feeling the muscles.

“So.. what are you doing?” I asked.

“Just doing a bit of testing. I understand you're missing some appendages, we were hoping to fix that.”

My ears perked up at the sound of this. “Oh?”

“You see, we work on medical robotics. Innovating robotic tools used in surgery and have been leading the way in robotic prosthetics. We have a few new designs that we've been perfecting that we'd like to try.” I looked to him with interest. “It would be like nothing ever happened to your other hand and tail.”

“Really?”

“Would you be interested?”

“Yes, yes I would.”

His face lit up as he typed something on his computer. “Great. We'll have that made up for you then. It should be just a couple days, during that time we'll build and implant the sockets.” I had no idea what he was talking about, but I nodded anyway. “It's been wonderful talking to you Mr. Foxwood.”

“Thank you!” I said. He left with a polite nod and left me alone once more. Overall, the day was blissful. There was occasional food brought in, it was mostly quiet, the sun shone through the window to keep me warm. All seemed to be well. The place had an almost eerie silence about it, I could never figure out why.

The next day, Dr. Lynch had me stand up and walk around a bit. This was no problem, and further pointed to a successful operation. She took me back to the same double doors to the large auditorium. Inside was the same table and equipment.

“What's going on this time?”

“The robotics team has some things to do in preparation for your prosthetics. This will probably be more involved than your head surgery.”

I nodded in understanding and sat down on the table. Dr. Heckyle came into the room and rubbed his gloved hands together.

“Hey hey Flechers.” He said in his almost playful tone. “So, today, we're going to be preparing the patient to accept the prosthetic appendages” he said, obviously to the audience watching above.

“Mr. Foxwood, can you please lay on the table?” I followed his instructions. He bent down close to me and whispered in my ear, “we don't usually do this, but I heard there were some complications last time, so I'm going to put you down now and go on from there. You usually wouldn't need this for a couple hours.”

“Understood...” I pressed my ears against my head and closed my eyes. Somehow, this was the

last thing I remember about that day. It was late at night when I came out of it and I was far more sore than before. This time, it was my entire left arm and my butt that hurt. I sat and groaned for a while, managed to get a sip of water before going back to sleep.

I sat in that bed for about two more days, in and out of consciousness briefly as I needed the pain medication this time. Near the end of the second day, I was doing much better. I moved my now shaved left arm up to look. At the end was a metal disk with a few gold spots and a socket in the middle that looked like it had several gold bands along the inside of it. I sat there inspecting it for a few hours, when suddenly a large group of people came into the room. All with laptop computers, most with thick glasses, and all variants of skinny to fat. One of them came up to me.

“Mr. Foxwood, hello.”

I had an odd feeling about this fellow, like he wasn't sure if I was intelligent enough to respond or not. I rolled onto my side and off the edge of the bed, landing on my feet before standing up. I stretched a bit and turned to face the speaker. “Oh, hey there.”

He looked at me with a bit of shock in his face. His thick glasses glistened in the sun as his pencil thin body shivered a bit. “Hey there, I'm Marcus Wittiger, head of the robotics team. I speak on behalf of everyone here when I say I'm proud to have you here today. We've worked hard on a little project for you.” He brought forth a tray with a perfect replica of my left hand, only, with a metal peg extending about two inches out where the arm was supposed to be. He picked it up and set the tray down. “Mr. Foxwood, your socketed arm please?”

I guessed he meant my left arm, so I held it out for him. He held up the end of my arm and fit the peg on the hand cleanly into the socket at the end of my arm. With a click, I suddenly felt Marcus' hands touching the fake one. I was a little surprised at this. As a bit of a test, I grasped his arm and held it tightly, and I could feel the warmth of his body, the pulse of his heart. Slightly frightened, I let go. He just looked up to me with a warm smile.

“Pretty wild, huh?”

I looked back in awe. “I'll say...”

“It should be like you've never lost your paw, Mr. Foxwood. Now, if you'd kindly turn around...” he pulled up what seemed to be a perfect replica of my tail next. I reached out and touched the soft fluff of it, it felt just like my real tail did. It had the same peg at the base of it, I guess that would explain why my butt hurt. I turned around as instructed, and with another click, I felt my tail try to wiggle out of Marcus' grasp, and finally flick freely in the air once he let go of it.

“Oh, wow...” I was truly in awe.

“Did we do well Mr. Foxwood?”

“That is perfect!” I flicked my tail from side to side happily.

“Well, you have the latest technology in prosthetic parts. Thanks for being such a great participant Mr. Foxwood.” He held out his hand, and I shook it gratefully. “Now, just to show you a couple things. The devices require a high concentration of iron in the blood to run, which, your bloodwork shows you should have no problem keeping up if you maintain your current diet. If you're not getting enough, you'll notice movements will be a little sluggish or not very strong.”

“Alright, I'll keep that in mind.”

He grasped my left hand. “Now, to remove it,” he pressed the wrist softly, the socket made a click and all feeling was suddenly lost in the hand before he pulled it off. “It's as simple as that. Then it just snaps back in.” He did so before letting go of me.

“Thanks, good to know.”

“Get some rest Mr. Foxwood.” And with that, he and the group left, happy to see their innovations working. I laid back down on the bed, flicking my tail up in the air, happy to have it back. It wasn't until I reached back to investigate how the new tail was attached that I realized that a large section of my back was shaved. I was suddenly very embarrassed to have my red fur missing to show my pale skin.

After a while, Dr. Killings came in. I was resting, so didn't pay much attention to her until she came up to me and scratched my back.

"Mmmrrr... Hello ma'am."

"We've concluded our research for now, we could do more and would like to but we're sure you wouldn't be up to it. You can leave us if you wish. The car is waiting for you. If you'd like to stay, you can."

"Mm... you've all been kind to me here. I wouldn't mind staying a little longer."

"Well, the other research we wanted to do was strength and stamina. We'd need you fully healed for that, so you can go home either way."

"Ah, of course. Well, contact me when you think I'd be ready..." I sat up and looked to her, swishing my tail across the bed.

"It's been a pleasure having you here Mr. Foxwood."

"Call me Flechmen, please."

She smiled politely. "Hope you recover quickly, Flechmen."

I smiled and nodded. "God bless y'all." And I was on my way, tail swaying behind me.

Outside, the car and guard was waiting; he opened the door for me to take a seat before getting in himself. "Evening Mr. Foxwood... you look a little bald." The guard said.

I moved around to look myself in the rear view mirror. Indeed, my head all the way around the level of my eyebrows was shaven bare, a circle of red around the very center of my head just above my ears. Must have been where they did the first surgery and sealed it back together. My left arm was shaved from about the elbow down to the new hand. Rubbing up against the seat a bit I could feel that my back was shaved down from the small of my back down to the top of my thighs. "My beautiful fur..."

The guard chuckled a bit. "You want something to drink?"

"Yeah, sure, Shirley temple."

"Not one for the drink are you?" The guard asked as he prepared a glass.

"It doesn't seem to affect me, but, I'd rather avoid it none the less."

He nodded and handed me my drink. "Understandable. Looks like they took care of you."

I nodded and sipped. "Indeed they did. They had a lot more for me than I thought."

"Looks like it." He paused for a moment. "We won't be taking you home just yet. The king wished to speak with you."

I perked my ears up. "Oh? Not really a good time." I chuckled "I mean, look at me."

"He wouldn't mind. Not sure what he wants though."

With a nod, I sat back and drank. "Alright, I suppose it's a good opportunity I shouldn't pass up."

It was some time later when we drove through the narrow roads of Shingle Falls. Through the main street until we came to the front gates of the royal palace (I guess you could call it). It was really just a large, stone house. It's only two stories high, with natural stone walls, lots of picture windows that look into the landscape surrounding it. All around it are thick stone walls and lush, green gardens. In the center of the front courtyard was a bronze statue of the king riding a horse. A worn stone path came from the main gates of the walls, around the statue, and to the large double doors of the palace. It never seemed like all that luxurious of a place, really. The car stopped before the gates and the guard signaled for me to leave. Upon doing so, the car left. I looked to the gates and they suddenly started to swing open. I walked in timidly, not sure what to expect. I was slightly surprised when my tail crept up between my legs. I looked up to the statue to see the king's benevolent upon the proud steed. I rather liked the king, he seemed to be a man with a true love for God and his country. I had never thought I'd meet him in person. I walked up to the palace, unsure of what to do I placed a hand on the heavy wood of the door. Both suddenly swung away from me, once open I could see two servants pulling them.

Inside was the main chamber, a massive room with high ceilings. The walls and ceiling were a

dark, heavy wood with stone floors. Various tapestries hung on the walls depicting past kings. A fine red rug ran from the door to a platform on the far end of the room. The wooden platform was raised slightly, with the finely carved throne placed upon it. The strangest thing about the room, was two rows of stone soldiers, one on either side of the big rug, that had their spears drawn and held out in such a way that it made an arch over the rug. The two servants that opened the doors, both young ladies dressed in pure white, walked down the center aisle. I followed them curiously until they went off through a door off to the side of the raised platform.

“Hello?” I called out, looking around curiously to the stern faces of the stone soldiers.

A servant opened the door off to the side of the platform, followed by another and finally the king. He wasn't a large man, maybe slightly taller than myself. He had thinning black hair and the brightest blue eyes. He wore a silken white shirt with a purple robe that went to the ground, a simple band of gold around his head. He came in with a bright smile and confident stride as he sat down on the throne.

“Flechmen Foxwood I presume?” He asked cordially.

An advisor, a rather chubby female faun in business cloths, stood behind him. She mouthed the words “bow down” to me.

I tipped my head respectfully, but I didn't bow down. “You would be right sir.”

He smiled and chuckled lightly. “Come here, I want to pet you.”

I tilted my head as a dog would do when curious. “I'm sorry, what?”

He gave a hand gesture. “Come here.”

Hesitantly, I came up to him. He gave another gesture for me to sit, so I squatted down in front of him. He reached his hand out and softly pet my shoulder. To be quite honest, it was a little awkward.

“Sorry about that, just something I've always wanted to do. Welcome to the palace Mr. Foxwood. Stand, please.” He said in a friendly manor. The adviser behind him gave me a cold stare and a general look of disapproval. She made my fur stand on end, not sure what it was.

“Thank you sir, pleasure to be here. But, might I ask why I'm here?”

He stood, looked me over briefly. “I wanted to invite you to stay here while you recovered.”

I looked at him strangely. “Why?”

“Because I've never seen one of your kind up close, and I've heard a lot about you in particular. Just an extension of kindness.”

With a nod, I stated “I'd love to stay here.”

He gave a smile, and gave me a gesture to follow. “Come then, let's get you dressed for supper.”

We went through the door off to the side of the platform. The palace was decorated much like a medieval castle, even down to decorative wall sconces lighting the halls. There were mazes of halls going every direction, each lined with doors. I could have mistaken the place for a hotel. We went up a fine staircase, through a few more halls, and finally through large double doors to the king's room. It was a massive space filled with fine purple rugs, silken bedspreads, and a rather large wardrobe. A servant placed a hand on my shoulder and beckoned me to come further into the room as the king sat at the end of his bed. Another servant pulled a purple tunic with orange and gold highlights from the wardrobe and brought it to me.

“Ah, thank you.” I said. It was a lovely piece to be sure. I put it on and looked in a mirror. “Not bad.”

“Does look nice.” The king noted. “Do you like it?”

“I suppose. It's a little tight around the chest.”

“Undo the top buttons.”

“Ah, that's better, showing a bit of fur though.”

“That's fine, your fur is nice in that spot anyway.”

“True.” I puffed the fur of my chest, made a few faces in the mirror and turned to face the king. He smiled and got up, his servants leading me out of the room. “So, what is for supper? I can't say I've

ever had a king's supper.”

He gave a bit of a chuckle, “Oh, raw chicken and beef, sides of wild berries and nuts.”

“What?”

“I don't know, what do you usually eat?”

“Oh, I'm not picky.”

“Good! I actually have no idea what's for supper, the cooks always make something nice. I've got some guests from Rakkaba. They're good friends, don't worry about impressing them. I don't believe they've seen one of your kind either.”

“Heh, I suppose I should be on my best behavior.” I stood up and puffed my chest.

“Nah, just be yourself.” He gave a little chuckle and patted my back. We kept walking through the ornate halls to the dining chamber. Some of the guests were already there: a rather large man in black attire and what I assume was his wife, a fine young lady in a silky white dress. Both stood in the presence of the king and I. They chuckled a little and watched me find a seat, a servant pulled the chair out for me.

“Thank you.” I took a seat and the servant pushed the chair back in.

The man and woman that were with us sat down, both looked over to me curiously. “So, Sebastian, is this your fox?”

The king chuckled. “Oh, he's not mine exactly.”

“Hello there.” I said innocently.

“He's the thing of legends isn't he?” the guest said.

The king gave a light chuckle, “No legends in the Falls.”

“I do see one legend is correct through.” I started.

“What's that?” the man in black attire asked.

“There's no polite people in Rakkaba.”

He gave me an odd look, the king smiled and gave a light chuckle and the guest copied his actions. “Good show fox!”

After a moment, the food arrived. What wonderful food it was! Succulent duck with rich gravy, fried vegetables with exotic and fabulous seasonings. I had never had such a wonderful meal before this. The guests were rather impressed as well and made comments of “we don't get this where I'm from” now and then. From stories and legends I've heard of kings, I expected fine ales to be overflowing, but the king served none. However, I have yet to find a finer drink than the spiced ciders and (non-alcoholic) root ales served there.

After the king's supper was a very fine peach and strawberry cobbler, served with a caramelized ginger and molasses toppings. Everything seemed to taste different at that table. Not necessarily better or worse, but different. I didn't find out until much later that the king was lactose intolerant and everything was made with almond and rice milk.

After the fine meal, the guests and king went off into their own private meeting. I was... I'd say invited to wander about the little palace on my own. I went out to the courtyard and curled up in a sunny spot for a good nap.

I woke up a couple hours later in a bed. Not quite sure how I got there... It was a fine silk bed with a very soft mattress. I recognized the room after a moment to be the room I got dressed in. The fine tunic I was using as a pillow outside was laying across the end of the bed and my dagger laying on the nightstand.

A servant came and set a glass of water on the nightstand. I said hello to her and she gave a smile and a nod before turning back out the door. The bed was pleasant, and I laid in it for quite some time before getting up and finding my way back to the main room. I sat beside the king's throne and waited quietly until he noticed me. He gave me a smile and I gave him a swish of my tail in greeting.

“Did you lose your tunic?” he asked.

“No, just didn't think about it. It's very relaxing here... I haven't had a worry since arriving. Just,

some strange peace here.”

“I wish it were that way for me...” He let out a deep sigh and slouched a bit.

“I can imagine it would be, being the king and all. I'm guessing those people were visiting here on business?”

“Indeed... Hmm. I feel a trust in you, not sure why. The president of Rakkaba has been giving offers to buy this land for some time. He sees the Falls as... 'small and insignificant'. Its to the point where if I accepted his offer, I'd be set for life. I keep giving him counter offers for areas of land around here. He rejects them all, and I just say 'well, now you know how I feel'. Its funny to see his face scrunch up when he gets all upset.”

“Why would he want this area?”

“I don't know. His religion believes there's some great power here. Even if there is, its something ungodly and evil if you ask me.”

I thought for a moment. “Would this power be something along the lines of... I dunno, a door to another world?”

“I think he mentioned something like that.”

“I... think I know where it is... I may have even gone through it.”

The king looked at me strangely “Huh, go figure... He told me the legend of it once. Some great witch with many human sacrifices conjured the power to make some kind of path to the afterlife that any could pass through. Exactly the kind of thing the Bible warns against... What was on the other side?”

“Some place kinda like here, but no dwarfs or elves or fauns or foxes... and they seem to be much more distant in the past.”

“Afterlife indeed!” He said with a chuckle.

“Well, I can say from experience that it fails greatly in comparison to Heaven.”

“That's assuring.” He relaxed back in his chair a bit. After a bit of a pause and a couple scratches behind the ears, he spoke again. “Do you know how kings are chosen?”

“I read about it once. The first king made a list of all his friend's names and when one bloodline ends, another steps in its place.”

“Indeed, that's exactly how it works. I'm sure you know I have no kin, no brothers or sisters.”

“Yep.”

“I have the power to... tweak the list. There's only human families on it you know. I think it would be far more fitting if the Foxwood clan were on there.”

I turned my ears a bit “Oh?”

“Yes...” he stroked the back of my head for a moment. “I think your peace and your knowledge... and your blessing would do this country well.”

At this point, I had no idea what he was talking about. “I... wow...”

“Its a lot to take in, I know. I just feel its the right thing to do. Anyway, its fairly late. I'll shall be going to bed soon. If you wish, you may join me in my chamber.”

“I think I will.”

The king stood and started walking towards his room. I followed along side him on all fours. For some reason, the walk felt very somber. The king sat up in his bed and I sat at the end of it. We read a little from the Bible and talked about it for a while before finally laying down to sleep. I, of course was curled up on the foot of the bed.

In the morning, I was awoken with soft strokes down my back by the king's soft hands. Kinda absentmindedly I rolled around and sighed contently as he rubbed my belly. It was really awkward looking back on it now... but, I was too tired still to mind at the time. “You're a strange one.” He told me.

“You're the one petting the belly of a giant fox.”

“Heh, so I am. Come on, lets get dressed.”

I spent several days there. I won't bore you with the details any further. It was more or less the same each day. I helped the king with some things now and then, gave him some input on a few issues, things like that. At one point, I did meet one of his advisers. A rather pompous woman who made it very known that she wasn't fond of me. The king shooed her off quite a bit. During this time, we became rather close friends. He had a great interest in electronics which he taught me a little about.

After a week or so, it was time once more to leave the palace and return to the hospital. Everyone remembered me, they all greeted me warmly.

I received a clean bill of health and most of the doctors, those who I knew and a couple people that I didn't meet but were working on me were amazed at the recovery.

I went back to the palace for one last meal before being sent home. It was a bit of a sad occasion but the king didn't let me go without the fine tunic I wore during my stay. Turned out it was the only thing that fit me.

Inside my home was all my friends and family. My mother gave me a tight hug that lasted quite a while, tears started streaming down her face. "We missed you so much..."

"I know, {I'm here now mother, I'm here now}."

"{We were worried... but we knew you'd be alright...}"

We held each other for a long time, soon everyone joined into a group hug. It was a very emotional moment that simple text can't really capture.

It must have been a half hour later when everyone finally sat down and coffee was made. I shared the stories of my time in the hospital and the palace.