

Happy to have us Animals

The letter came in a crisp white envelope, its left-hand corner marked with a return address in immaculate Kanji. It was 4 p.m. and Lisbeth had heard the courier driving away up the street. She scampered out to the mailbox right away, eager to finally see some good news.

Her paws trembled as she stood there in the thick October fog and tore the envelope open:

Ms. Matsuoka,

We regret to inform you that your application for asylum in the Aomori National Reservation has been denied by the Bureau of Immigration. Know that, at this time, our reservations are nearly full and the Japanese government has no choice but to...

Lisbeth had to stop reading. She'd already been denied by the Blackfeet and Pine Ridge reservations. They were tough, barren lands, but they had embraced the forsaken – the engineered people who resembled the images on their totems.

Applying for asylum in Japan, home-country of her grandparents had been her last shot. With the transhuman ban going into effect across the United States in less than a month and the Supreme Court ruling against the ACLU's appeals, she soon wouldn't have many choices left. There were the colonies in northern Canada and the work camps down in Mexico, but either option would mean the end of her life in the United States, the end of her budding career in the

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arts, and the end for her chances with Courtney.

She ran inside, tears streaming down her face, and dropped the letter on the floor on the way to the bathroom.

“Lisbeth, what is it?” It was her roommate, Cara.

Lisbeth ignored her and slammed the bathroom door, swiping the lipsticks and grooming scissors off the counter as she collapsed and sobbed into the sink. Cara had long ago secured a spot with the Navajo. While Lisbeth should have been applying with her, she had instead held onto hope, praying that Courtney would change her mind. Praying that they could use the marriage loophole to make her legal. Courtney’s parents had never approved; not of their relationship, nor of Lisbeth’s biology.

Cara knocked on the door but Lisbeth barely heard her. She was clenching her paws so tightly that she could feel her claws digging into her palms. She looked up into the mirror and asked herself for the hundredth time why her parents had made her this way. Her grey, bristly fur was dotted with tears and her cheeks looked sunken and thin. Her paw came up to the mirror and she stared into her dark, orb-like eyes. She was like a cartoon character: half human, half squirrel. She was something that should never have been, but the alternative had been malformed limbs and damaged organs: for decades, Environmental Genetic Spoilage had wreaked havoc on newborns. Some parents aborted, others let their children be born broken, but many more opted for something else: transmutation.

Transmutation was a radical solution. The geneticists replaced broken genes with those from animals and crafted new people, new *things*. The technique was quickly banned, but when the medical exceptions came through the courts, parents all over the country and the world began trying it. If it saved their kids from an early death, why not?

It opened the door to designer babies: the first transhumans. At first it had just been neon eyes and green hair, clear skin and stronger hearts. Then the law slackened, and people began to choose genes for intelligence and athletic ability. The technology moved faster as supercomputers sequenced new options by the week. Soon, parents were having children with the night vision of cats and the eyes to match. Some adults and celebrities joined in too, altering themselves with gene therapy and changing their own appearances.

“Lisbeth, come on!” Cara called.

Why did they do it? She asked herself, but she knew. The genes she received would steel her brain against the strokes she would otherwise have had, and she had been raised in San Francisco, a city where transhumanism had become not just OK, but fashionable. For people in a tech-focused city, it was just another of the leaps in technology that had become all too common, including interplanetary travel, nanocomputing, and environmental engineering.

Lisbeth sobbed, and then tried to breathe. Her paw finally slid to the counter. She had been lucky, she knew. She had avoided birth defects and hadn’t ended up a complete freak. She wasn’t half Pit Bull or cow, part fish or green like a frog. She had no breathing problems, no special needs beyond grooming and diet.

She backed away from the bathroom counter as Cara jiggled the lock open and came in.

“Lisbeth... Lizzy, Tiz, I saw the letter.” Lisbeth couldn’t turn to face her, but Cara came up, pushed Lisbeth’s tail aside, and gave her a hug from behind. Finally, Lisbeth turned and hugged Cara around the waste, sobbing into her fluffy belly, for Cara was two feet taller than Lisbeth, a full six foot two, with long ears to match her teeth. She was part rabbit, and built like a basketball player.

Cara was a transhuman law activist and defender of the mutts, they liked to joke. For

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Lisbeth she was like an older sister, but in less than a month she would be leaving San Francisco to help on the reservations in Arizona.

Lisbeth let go and shook her head. “You warned me so many times. I should have applied sooner.”

“Well, at least it’s not hopeless, Tiz. You’ve got a shot. Come on you; let me make you a cup of tea, eh?”

“OK,” Lisbeth said as Cara ushered her out to their fuzzy chair. With her stubby legs and long bushy tail, the huge chair felt like a nest for Lisbeth’s small body. She had fallen asleep on it while studying art history on more than one occasion.

Cara was already banging around in the kitchen when Lisbeth caught her words. “What did you mean when you said it’s not hopeless?”

“What Tiz? Oh. You know, the part about the colony ship.”

Lisbeth’s face scrunched up. *Colony ship?*

She searched the floor, and then finally spotted the letter on the dining room table where Cara must have left it. Lisbeth held it to the light and read the final paragraph.

However, due to the strength of your application and lack of alternative options, we would like to offer passage on a JSA ship to one of the colonies in the outer rim. Your expertise in the arts would be a great help to our pioneers settling new worlds. Write back at your earliest convenience and we can forward the necessary paperwork. The deadline is Monday, the 26th. We apologize for the short notice.

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There was more below, including an email address scrawled in the hand-writing of the Japanese ambassador. She had met him personally to hand in her asylum application and he had been sympathetic then, if pessimistic of her chances. She'd seen the posters along the embassy walls and knew of the opportunities off planet. One poster with a hawk-faced cowboy proclaimed that it was a "wild west" out there in the galaxy. "Live Free on the Frontier" it said.

Lisbeth dropped the letter to the table. She didn't want to move to some experimental planet. She didn't want to leave her friends behind. She just wanted to finish art school and have a normal life.

She let her face fall into her hands again, even as Cara came up behind her and set the mug of tea down. "It may not be what you wanted, but it's an option, eh? Come on Tizzy." She put a hand on her shoulder.

"I don't want to go." She should have been thinking of the exhibition of paintings she was trying to organize, of the surrealist transhuman portraits she needed to finish, but in that moment only Courtney came to mind.

* * * * *

The phone rang and rang as Lisbeth held it to her ear. She was shivering in the cold, standing on the back patio after a smoke. It was Sunday the 18th, and overhead a cloud-shaped metallic ship was roaring into the sky. Lisbeth plugged her free ear and closed her eyes. "Come on, come on, come on."

The phone rang five times, then six, and seven. "Come on Courtney," she whispered to herself. "Come on."

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It went to voicemail and Lisbeth was about to hang up, but then she heard the click of an answer. “Lizzy?”

“Courtney!”

“Liz, it’s over. It’s been over. You have to, like, stop calling. My parents are totally freaking out...”

“Courtney, they denied my application. You’re my last chance.”

Lisbeth could hear Courtney shaking her head over the phone.

“You know I can’t, Lisbeth. My career won’t allow it. Babe, we’ve barely talked for months.”

“Screw your career!” The words just tumbled out. “The world doesn’t need another music theory professor, god dammit. Courtney, come on!” She knew she was being unfair, but she couldn’t help it. “We used to create things together.” Lisbeth’s tail shook.

“I’m sorry, Lisbeth.” The phone clicked off and went silent as leaves whirled by and chimney smoke rose from the house next door. It was cold, but Lisbeth could barely feel it through her fur.

Her paws trembled as she lit another cigarette and sucked the musky fumes into her lungs. Her genetics made her jittery and it was the only thing that helped.

Lisbeth could sense Cara was watching from the kitchen and knew what she would say.

She sucked in the smoke, took a deep breath, and twitched her tail in the wind as anger burned in her belly. It was so unfair! The world had abandoned her. So had her parents and her girlfriend. They had wanted her to undergo gene therapy, to shave her fur and clip her ears so she could look more *normal*. But she wasn’t going to be normal, even if her appearance changed.

She clutched the phone and felt the plastic crunching under her claws, then turned on the

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screen and brought up the new name and number she had already programmed in.

“Fine. Screw it,” she chittered. The cigarette snapped between her teeth and tumbled to the ground.

Screw Courtney and screw her family. Screw art history and the San Francisco Art Institute for not protecting its students. Screw the president and screw congress and screw California and Earth and the whole damned solar system for all she cared!

She clicked a claw against the call button without letting herself think about it. This time, the answer was fast.

“Hello? Ambassador Maeda?”

* * * * *

The ship’s engine wailed in the wind. It was preparing to leave once and for all, its exhaust blowing December snowflakes across the lead-hardened concrete of the Montana spaceport. The ship hung almost miraculously over the ground, a blocky white leviathan of frosted steel and aluminum. It held the sleeping pods and supplies they would need on their new world of Moriyama, a forest-covered planet a little larger than the Earth that orbited a small orange star.

Lisbeth was standing there clutching her backpack with the rest of the freaks and the weirdos. Some of them were mutts like her: a hawk person, a greyhound, an orange tabby stood side by side like a clique of disaffected Egyptian gods. But many and more were human, too, each leaving Earth for their own reasons, political, economic, or personal. Already, there were close to a thousand people on board and this was the last stop before launch, the last chance to change their minds before leaving their homes forever. Lisbeth thought of Cara, then, writing

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briefs in some pinewood lodge. She wished she were here too.

Lisbeth lit a smoke, even as the steward came out to usher them aboard. She knew she wasn't supposed to, but she sucked as much of the smoke down as she could, feeling it swirl inside her lungs as it smoothed the rocky seas of her thoughts.

But then the steward saw her and singled her out. "Please madam! No smoking before hibernation."

"Oh." She tossed it on the ground and stomped it out as if it had been an accident. She'd have to wait, now, before climbing into her pod.

He tsk'ed as she passed by, but let her on all the same and slid the door shut behind them both. The walls inside glowed sunset orange as purple arrows pointed their way to the pods. It was sunset on the old world, but what would sunrise look like on the new?

The ship took off almost immediately, but its movement was barely perceptible in the artificial gravity field. They were led to a changing room, where they slid into loose, one-piece garments of smooth synthetic material. The fabric felt almost like water against her arms and legs.

The whole experience was alien. Men changed in front of women, mouse-people beside cat-people. Many were shivering, their feet and paws shoeless on the cold metal deck.

Lisbeth's tiny spacesuit was still too big for her, so she had to roll the sleeves up as they went to the medical bay to get scanned. She was, of course, turned aside while the rest went to climb into their pods and prepare for the long sleep, stacked like cases of water along the walls of the main hold.

Lisbeth sat to wait beside a dark feathered, crow-faced girl.

"Couldn't wait to smoke, either?" she asked with a raspy caw to her voice. Her head

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cocked slightly to the side as she appraised Lisbeth.

“No,” Lisbeth admitted. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“When you decided to climb on board, you mean? You and me both, sister.” Her laughs came out like a crow’s. “I’m Allie.”

“Tiz,” she said, deciding that maybe, just maybe, she would leave her old name behind. “How long is the journey, again?” She knew the answer already. Still, she couldn’t think of anything else to talk about.

“Twenty-three years,” the crow-woman said, “but it will only feel like a few; well, it would if we were awake. Because relativity, or something like that. CawCawCaw.”

Lisbeth giggled a little and wiped her sleeve along her eyes. She was crying again. “I can’t believe it’s finally happening.”

“Eh? Good riddance.” Allie waved a dark, feathery hand as if shooing the Earth and all its problems away. “Bunch of normos down there.”

Lisbeth — Tiz — sniffled and hugged her arms around her tiny chest. “How are you so calm right now?”

Allie tilted her head and shot Tiz a sideways glance. “Oh, you know, the usual. I’m just sick of this shit: the politics, the deadend relationships, no career, blaw, blaw, blaw.” She swept her claws back and forth through the air again. “I let go a long time ago. And you, sweetie, should do the same.”

Tiz nodded, gazing at her blurry reflection in the white metal of the ship’s paneling. She barely recognized herself in the spacesuit.

“What are you doing when we get there?” she asked Allie.

“Oh, psh. Basic stuff. Farming, building, labour, blaw blaw blaw.” She reached for her

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front pocket, where Tiz suspected her cigarettes would normally have been. “What about you, space squirrel?”

“Same,” she said, though she knew she’d be helping with more than that, painting and creating murals and working on shrines and libraries and other public buildings.

“Right on. Power to the proletariat,” Allie joked, cawing again as her beak parted in what Tiz thought must be a smile. Then she held out her feathery hand for Tiz to fist bump.

Tiz couldn’t help but smile as her tiny paw bumped the taller woman’s fist. She liked this strange bird person. In the moment, gravity itself seemed to turn on them, and the world outside the window swung past at a sickening angle.

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The first day came in the cosmic blink of an eye. Tiz had been terrified even to get off the ship, but now that she was here she felt a strange calm, as if she’d finally woken from a long surreal dream and knew it was over. She took a deep breath, her body feeling lighter than it should have as the doors hissed open, and then there they were.

The new colonists shambled sleepily off the ship. It had glided along the ground while they slept, through a narrow tract into a forest of sequoias and giant pines that were engineered to provide the lumber their world would need. The air was cool and misty and smelt of sap, a fresh smell, tainted only by the wood smoke from the huts and cabins. They had settled on one side of a large rectangular-shaped clearing, while the first ship to arrive had settled on the other end. The trees formed a towering wall around the nascent town, but even so, mountains loomed beyond everything. It seemed almost like they had landed on Earth again by accident, but then large glowing insects lifted from the brush and hovered nearby. Tiz gazed at them curiously, but then

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heard voices approaching.

People of all colors and species rushed up to greet the new arrivals, hugging them and pushing care packages into their hands.

“Welcome to Moriyama!” a cat-faced woman called. She hugged Tiz into her scrawny arms, and then pushed a white box into her hands. “You’ll want to head to Ship-1 to sign up for an apartment.” She pointed at the other ship on the far side of the clearing.

Tiz found herself bobbing along with the crowd, half in disbelief as others stopped their work to wave from the scaffolds of new buildings. The walkway was lined by glowing Japanese lanterns and all around her pretty wooden buildings were going up. To the left a huge tori gate stood, leading into the forest where a Japanese temple had been erected. Beyond it, at the center of town, was a public square with old-style market stalls.

“Hey you, tree-rat, wanna be roommates?”

Tiz turned, her tail flicking in annoyance, then saw that it was Allie.

“Well, I don’t know anyone else,” Tiz admitted.

“CawCawCaw. So you’re saying I’m your last choice, eh?” She drew some sort of hand-rolled smoke out from inside her sleeve. “Think this can change your mind?”

Tizzy’s paw leapt to her face as she started to giggle. “No! You didn’t.

“Oh yes.” Allie jabbed it between her beak and lit it up. “Snuck some of the good stuff on board. And don’t worry, we’ll be farming more — makes good rope — but we gals need to keep going in the meantime, right?”

She passed it to Tiz, who took a drag. The far white ship was looking larger as they walked through the market, where smells of roasting nuts and vegetables wafted through the air. Tiz’s small feet were scampering quickly along the pine needles, and it was hard to take it all in

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“You think they’ll care we’re smoking out here?”

“Care? Caw! They barely have laws out here, Tiz. As long as we work, they’re happy to have us animals. See?” She pointed a talon to the welcome banner hanging above the entrance of the other ship.

“Happy to have us,” Tiz said, mostly to herself, then let the words roll off her tongue.

“Happy to have us.” She couldn’t remember the last time she had heard the phrase.

“You know it, kiddo.” Allie took the smoke back and took a long drag. “You know what the name of this place means?”

“Moriyama?” Tiz shook her head.

“Guardian mountain. When I read that, I knew it was for me. Good thing they speak English, huh? CawCawCaw!”

“Good thing,” Tiz repeated. For the first time in a long time, she couldn’t help but shake her whiskers and smile.