

SHI

Volume One:
The End Where It Begins

Mae L. Strom

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– ACT ONE –

Flounder

Chapter Three:

'Rise and shine...'

Bedroom

'Rise and shine, sleepyhead! It's a beautiful day outside.'

Teal's head poked up from his pillow. 'Wait, really?' His father laughed.

'Nope.'

Kitchen

Rain pelted down the windowpane. Everything outside the kitchen was dark and grey, and all around, there was a slow, steady rumbling, like a kettle coming to the boil.

'So what's the plan?'

Teal poured himself a bowl of Frosted Sprat Flakes, rubbing his eyes under the bright tungsten lights. 'Well the plane leaves at ten—'

'Are you sure about that?'

Teal yawned. 'Pretty sure. Trust me, I read the prize pack so many times, I basically know it off by heart. This is the master of planning you're talking to.'

'No, I mean that.' Teal's father nodded to the bowl.

Teal squinted at him in confusion. It was too early in the

morning for this. ‘Am I sure about sprat flakes in the morning? Weird question. There’s never a bad time in the day for sprat flakes.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that.’

Teal got up and slumped his way over to the fridge. ‘I don’t know who made you the cereal police, but sure,’ he shrugged. ‘The more important issue is that in a few hours, I’ll be in a country that might not even have sprat flakes. So what’s the plan?’

‘Well the plane takes off at ten, and the flight’s ten hours long, which everybody seems to think is an incredibly reasonable amount of time to spend being imprisoned in a small metal tube, surrounded by similarly terrified strangers who are one minor mechanical failure away from kissing their posteriors goodbye, and ironically writing messages their loved ones will never read on the back of their emergency safety instructions...’

He opened the fridge door and groped around blindly, but the familiar shape of the carton was missing. He bent down to take a look inside. ‘Oh.’

‘Oh?’

‘No milk.’

‘No milk?’

‘Nope.’

‘Not even a drop?’ If he was trying to conceal his own amusement, he wasn’t doing a very good job.

Teal sighed, returning to his heaving bowl of dry sprat flakes with empty paws and a heavy heart. ‘That’s fine,’ he said. ‘Who needs milk anyway?’ He grabbed a handful of them and crunched away, doing his best to conceal the fact that they’d instantly sucked every drop of moisture from his mouth. Chewing was a slow, loud and laborious process, and

it only got harder the more he did it.

‘You were saying, master of planning?’

‘Huh?’

‘The action plan.’

At long last, Teal managed to get the mouthful down. ‘Oh, that.’

His father’s face looked like it could explode into laughter at any moment. ‘You know, you could always just pour the cereal back...’

Teal stared at him defiantly and filled another paw with sprat flakes. ‘The competition’s part of a deal with the university over there, so when the plane lands in Nahashi, a representative’s going to meet me there and drive us all the way to Takai. Then, we can use the train system to get to the hotel.’

He poured the flakes into his mouth, making a point to emphasise just how delicious they were, and dedicating the rest of his efforts to trying to keep them down. He thought the sugar frosting would help, but if anything, it only made things worse. All the sugar in the world couldn’t make the dry sprat flakes go down. ‘The hotel’s really cool actually,’ he mumbled with a paw over his mouth. Tiny flakes flew across the table. ‘The Ten Takai Palace. It’s supposed to have the most amazing view—’

Thunder rumbled outside. Teal sighed. ‘And I really hope it’s not going to look anything like this when I get there.’

‘Well you’re in luck,’ his father said. He held the cereal box out to him. Teal conceded defeat, reluctantly pouring the remainder of his sprat flakes away. ‘I went online, and it looks like Sakurai’s got nothing but sun for the whole week.’

‘That’s amazing! ’

‘You’re telling me! You should count your lucky stars.’

‘No, I mean it’s amazing that you finally figured out how to use the internet.’

‘That’s no way to talk to your old pops.’ His father stuck his tongue out. ‘The second I found the internet button, it was all over.’

Teal laughed. ‘You’re a real full-time tech wizard, Dad.’

‘You bet your scruff I am... just as soon as I figure out how that darn printer works. You nervous?’

Teal stared at him. ‘I’d be stupid not to be, right?’

His father nodded. ‘Foxes weren’t meant to fly. If we were, we’d have been born with wings. Or giant catapults on our backsides instead of tails.’ Teal grinned. ‘You’ll be fine. I’d be more worried about all the fun you’ll be missing out on.’

‘Fun?’

‘Oh, you have no idea.’ His father crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. ‘Madelia Marjoram’s going to be inflicting our street with quite a few visits before the Out and Out Parade rolls through. As if the earthquake wasn’t bad enough...’

‘Madelia who now?’

‘The current Minister for Education.’

‘Is that the same Minister for Education you were yelling about earlier? The one on the radio?’

‘Aye, that’s the one. Just because she’s never done a thing for this city doesn’t mean she can’t still pretend otherwise to her constituents. She’ll be making speeches and canvassing her way through the whole of Lower Prospects just before the elections. If it’s anything like last year, you’ll be missing out. Never mind the parade – you won’t be able to make it to the shops and back without being stopped by a camera crew and asked what life is like for the commoners these days.’

‘Then I guess I’d better get down to Thrifts before she

starts.' Teal got up from his chair, throwing one last sprat flake into his mouth for good measure.

'Not like that though.'

Teal looked around, crunching away. 'Like what?'

Emmett licked his paw, leaned over and brushed it firmly down the back of Teal's neck. 'If I didn't know any better, I'd swear I had a hedgehog for a son.'

'Which would be entirely possible if his father was also a hedgehog,' he retorted, sticking his tongue out. Emmett smiled and patted at his own fur self-consciously.

Teal's phone buzzed on the table. He snatched it up immediately before his father could see the screen.

'Who's that then? A study partner at uni? One of your old buddies? Maybe even a special someone?'

'It's nothing. Just Finn.'

His father nodded. 'You know, I'm glad you two have managed to stick together all these years. As thick as thieves, ever since you were kits. You really are inseparable, aren't you?'

A thousand thoughts were running through Teal's head as he headed towards the door. The countless times Finn had been there for him, and the innumerable secrets they'd shared. Childhood adventures that were too naïve to revisit, and teenage mishaps that were too embarrassing to repeat. The way Teal felt about him – the way he'd always felt about him, and the way he hoped somewhere, deep down inside, Finn felt too. It was something his father could never be allowed to find out about. Not ever. How could he possibly sum up so many years, and so much complicated emotion in a single answer?'

'Yep.'

Bathroom

‘So it’s the big day, huh?’

Teal ran a paw along his cheek, staring at his reflection in the mirror and listening to the phone on speaker next to him. His fur was rough. He looked like he’d slept on his face, and his whiskers weren’t doing great either.

It wasn’t that he had any issues with the natural look. He didn’t believe in whisker tinting, or the even stranger trend of cutting them off completely, which had been all the rage just a few years ago when Larenne fashion models started doing it. All the same, he couldn’t help but think they looked a little flat as they hung there. One of them was definitely crooked too. He tweaked his nose and prodded at it. That would have to go.

‘Yeah, it’s the big day alright.’

Teal pinched his electric razor from the shelf. Contorting his nose to expose the root of the crooked whisker, he flicked it on and slowly, carefully, he began to move it forwards, barely daring to breathe. This would require the upmost concentration. There could be no distractions.

‘I guess I’d better say something in case this is the last time we talk.’

Teal almost dropped the razor. ‘Finn, that’s not funny. I could’ve taken half my cheek off. You’re definitely buying that coffee now.’

‘What, for helping to improve your look?’

Teal put down the razor and muted his phone. Closing his eyes, he cocked his head, and on the count of three, he pulled the whisker out in one swift motion.

‘Gah!’

He was definitely awake after that. It was only after he stopped hissing through his teeth that he unmuted the phone.

‘Sorry for putting you on mute. I just had to pull a whisker.’

‘Are you implying that talking to me makes you want to pull your whiskers out?’

‘Don’t be silly, Finn. Although now that I think about it...’

‘On second thought, don’t answer that!’

Teal chuckled to himself.

‘Anyway, whisker pulling aside, I’ve been looking for places we can go when you come back. I thought it might be cool to branch out from the usual Good Bean and Gulp-N-Go visits, you know? There’s a really nice Brewmin’ Marvellous just over by Foxward Street. Doesn’t do unlimited refills either, so we could pretend to be all posh while we’re there.’

Teal shook his head, grinning in the mirror. Grabbing his face brush, he moved on to tidying up his cheeks, brushing outward from his muzzle in small strokes. ‘Pretend? Hey, you pretend all you want. I think I’d blend in just fine.’

‘Hey, blending in better than me is not the same as blending in just fine!’

‘Agreed.’

Finn just laughed. ‘Hey, this is... nice.’

‘This is what?’ Teal’s paw stopped mid-stroke. ‘I know you’re just leading up to another punchline, but as long as this one’s not about planes falling out of the sky, I’ll play along.’

‘No, I mean it. Being able to chat with you off campus is... nice. Outside of a coffee shop, we haven’t really done it in a while. Stuff just gets in the way, you know?’

Teal sighed and put the brush down. ‘I’m sorry, Finn. I should have asked for your number earlier. Then, after your grandma... when you had to move, we wouldn’t have lost contact. I should have been there for you.’

‘Hey, don’t sweat it,’ he said. ‘That’s not on you. Life happens.’

‘I guess...’

Unconvinced, Teal ran a weary paw through his cheeks. The hedgehog was finally starting to look like a fox again. Giving a big, toothy yawn to the mirror, he left his mouth open and ran his tongue along his pearly whites. They looked like they were doing just fine. No conspicuous lumps of sprat flake stuck between them either. He reached for the Apex and got to flossing. It didn’t matter how many times he insisted to his father that they didn’t need Apex-brand dental floss – there was always a fresh pack waiting for him. The old tod swore by it.

‘But now you’ve got my number, you can call me whenever you like. So if you need anything, even if it’s just to pass the time, I’m here.’

‘Hey, likewise. If you wanted to go through some of the reading while you’re away, I’m down. Just gather your notes, pull up a chair and sit back with a nice room service hot chocolate. And I mean a really nice one. The works, with cream, marshmallows, cocktail umbrellas...’

‘Why would a hot chocolate have cocktail umbrellas?’

‘Because cocktail umbrellas are the bomb. It’s an objective fact that even the best drink in the world would be better with more cocktail umbrellas. Plus, when you’re done drinking it, you can use the cocktail sticks to help prop your eyes open for the long night ahead.’

Teal grinned. ‘You’re so dumb.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’

‘That you’re also the best.’

‘Now that’s news to me. I could tell you something you don’t know.’

‘What?’

‘That everything’s going to be fine, and you worry too

much.'

Teal sighed. 'But what if it's not. You read the news. What if something happens up there?'

'It won't,' Finn reassured him. 'It can't. After all, you still owe me a date, remember?'

Teal blushed. 'I need to go and get ready.'

'Are you blushing?'

'Talk to you later, Finn.'

'Definitely blushing.'

'Going now.'

'Hey, talk to you on the other side.'

Teal slipped his phone back into his pocket, grinning in spite of himself. 'Finn, you really are the worst.'

The cuts on his fingers were still twinging, so he rummaged through old pill boxes and replacement blades on his shelf to find the plaster container. Luckily, when he finally found it and gave it a shake, it still rattled. He pinched the last two plasters from the box and wrapped them tightly around each finger, making sure to test them with a few blasts of icy water from the tap. The waterproof coating held up just fine.

Hopefully, this was the last time he'd have to put them on. He certainly didn't want to be wearing them when he came back. Turning up to a date with a paw covered in plasters would be as embarrassing as walking into the café with a bloody handkerchief pinched around his nose, and he drew enough attention from strangers as it was.

'Never give them an excuse,' he reminded his reflection.

'Because insecure animals will always be looking for one.'

He glanced at the mirror one last time before leaving the bathroom. He may not have been wearing any gels, moisturisers, fur straightening creams or tints, but the fox staring back at him looked perfectly presentable. It would be

interesting to find out how many seconds the rain needed to fix that.

Over by the front door, he zipped up his blue raincoat, flipped up the red hood, fastened the tail cover and crushed his hind paws into an old set of red Wellington boots that he'd vowed never to wear again. They were already aching, but it had been years since he bought his last pair.

'Who still wears wellies anyway?' he grumbled, taking a few steps back and forth to sit them in properly. If he wanted to make his flight, he needed to get a move on. But he'd never been gone for a week before. It was going to be hard to leave everything behind. He waddled over to his bedroom and pushed the door open.

It was dark, but that barely fazed him. He could make everything out from memory alone.

There was his old bedside cabinet, which housed his first Valentine's Day card among other childhood trinkets, and his tiny bed, which unfortunately hadn't grown up with him. Underneath it sat a pile of his most beloved books: there was *A Murder of Crows*, *Long is the Leash*, a few of his favourite historical autobiographies, a childhood book of old fairy tales, and of course the book currently resting on the top, his all-time least favourite – *Bark Without the Bite: An Introduction to Binturong Medicine, 431-1866*.

For a devourer of books, *Bark without the Bite* was the indigestion-inducing raw onion of his collection.

The shelves along the wall were filled with books too, all except the last one by the window, which was dedicated to his old Gamestation Suprema, complete with all the classics. He wouldn't have dared to guess which of the shelves had seen more use, although he'd certainly lost many a night's sleep getting to the end of a quest, whether the time was spent

thumbing his way through pages or battering his thumbs bloody on the controller.

Even his wardrobe at the back of the room was steeped in history. The doors were pocketed with small holes from the time he and Finn had used it for target practice. He still couldn't look at it without experiencing a pang of the animalistic terror that he'd felt when they were caught using the pellet gun in the house. At the time, he hadn't known whether he was going to survive the punishment from his father. It all seemed so quaint now.

He placed a paw atop the leaning tower of research notes and looked around. He had no idea why the sight made him so sad. But it did. It was like staring into his childhood. Should he say something before he left?

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. For once, he couldn't think of anything. He'd been stumped. Luckily, it didn't matter much. He crouched by his travel suitcase, the seams of which were fit to bursting, and counted out a few notes from the small red envelope before carefully packing it away again. He'd be back soon anyway.

After all, it was only a week.

Streets

The downpour was unbelievable. The raindrops that broke against his head were the size of golf balls, battering his hood this way and that like they were trying to knock him over. He tried holding it steady with a paw, but the rain just shot straight down his sleeve, instantly drenching his arm.

The crowds surrounding him weren't much better, elbowing their way past and constantly batting his tail around. Every few steps, it would get trapped between two of them, and he'd have to hold in a yelp as it wrenched him back.

There were no apologies either. That was Opus City for you.

‘This is ridiculous,’ he groaned. He stopped in the street to button the tail cover up against his back, apologising to the many disgruntled, similarly drenched pedestrians that edged by. No sooner had he done up the last button than he heard a familiar ding, and felt a familiar vibration in his pocket. Not now. Any time but now.

‘This had better be good, Finn,’ he shivered, digging a dripping paw into his pocket. ‘I swear, if it’s another picture of a hat...’

But when he drew it out, the screen was blank. There were no notifications at all, just like before. Why did this keep happening to him? He felt like he was being punished for carrying around such a technological fossil. ‘I need a new phone. Nothing fancy or anything. Just one that works.’

A few seconds out in the open and his phone was drenched. Countless droplets glowed a strange neon rainbow over the screen protector. He tried wiping them off, but his paw was already sopping wet; it just pushed the water around. He put it back in his pocket and rubbed it against the lining to dry it.

‘This had better be worth it,’ he sighed, narrowing avoiding yet another elbow in the crowd. He couldn’t help but wonder if this last-minute trip to the shops had been such a good idea after all. All this for some milk...

Train

He stood in the middle of the carriage, holding onto a pole with rainwater dripping from his whiskers. Around him, at least a dozen bucks were huddled tightly together, their peeling, interlocking antlers in various stages of disarray.

‘And antler wrap,’ Teal muttered, jumping as the train jostled the passengers together once more. He tried his best to

ignore all the red velvet hanging in his peripheral vison. The facility station door was wide open only a few feet away, the empty Shed-Ease rolls and tissue dispensers on full display. ‘Lots and lots of antler wrap.’

Thrifts

‘Nope, nope, nope, that one’s leaking all over the floor, nope. Wait... no, I was right the first time.’

Teal sniffed, wiping his nose. He was inching his trolley along the milk labels in the cold aisle. ‘Sans-Deer, Sans-Squirrel, Sans-Cow... Ah!’ His paw closed over the plastic carton. ‘Sans-Fox!’

‘Ew.’

Teal looked down in surprise. There was a fox kit standing by a heaving trolley nearby, holding a jug of chocolate-flavoured almond milk that was almost as big as he was. A large medical eyepatch sat over his right eye. The straps were holding his ear down, which, judging by his face, he didn’t seem particularly happy about.

‘You okay down there?’

The kit squinted at him, pulling at the straps. ‘Is it true that they secretly mix all the milk together at the factory, and just pretend it’s different?’

Teal laughed. He’d heard similar rumours when he was at school. Anybody who drank the milk was teased relentlessly for it. Sans-Fox was a formula composed of many different types of animal milk, minus that of a fox, and it was the same for the numerous other brands. Nobody wanted to drink anything that came from their own species, obviously. That would be absurd.

The name really said it all. But you try telling that to a group of kits at school when all the milk cartons look exactly

the same.

‘I used to think the same thing, but trust me, it’s just older kits teasing you. In a few years, you’ll probably go on a school trip to one of the plants like I did. There, you can learn about why it’s donated, and you’ll see just how careful they are to keep them separate. They’d be in a lot of trouble if they didn’t. The nutritional information on the sticker would be all wrong, and some folk with allergies wouldn’t be very happy. So yeah, please don’t be afraid of it. It’s just milk.’

‘Mum says it’s bad because we don’t know who it comes from.’

‘Good,’ Teal said. ‘You wouldn’t want to know, right?’

The fox kit grimaced. ‘I guess. But who cares? I’m not allowed to drink it anyway.’

‘Oh?’

‘The doctor says if I do, my stomach’ll explode.’

‘Now that’s a good reason not to drink it.’

‘Mhmm...’ He tried in vain to rub his eye through the eyepatch. ‘You’re all blue.’

Teal nodded. ‘I am.’

The kit bit his lip. ‘Did you get that way from eating too many blueberries?’

‘Actually, you turn blue if you don’t eat enough blueberries. So you’d better make sure you’re eating lots of fruit and vegetables. You can’t be too careful.’

‘Okay... I’m gonna ask Mum to get some blueberries now.’

Teal resisted the urge to smile until the fox kit had gone, but watching him frantically drag his mother along by her sleeve was almost too much. Chuckling quietly to himself, he added the carton of Sans-Fox to his trolley.

He was running against the clock now, but there were still

a few items left on the list, and he wasn't leaving until every last thing had been crossed off. He had no intention of letting his father live off stale chicken toast while he was away.

'Teal!'

He turned around. He'd know that voice anywhere. 'Dinah! What are you doing here?'

'The same thing everyone else is doing, I think,' she said. Similarly drenched, her fur clung tightly to her raincoat, and yet she looked so happy, her tail wagging vigorously away. The shelves behind her were soaked. 'Just looking at nice things.'

'Ah, I see. Window shopping.'

She shook her head, seemingly confused. 'Thrifts doesn't sell windows. I think you're thinking of the hardware store next door.'

'Of course.' Teal smiled. 'I'm glad I got to see you before I headed off.'

Her tail slowly came to a halt. She looked as though she'd just seen a ghost. After a few awkward seconds of silence, she dropped her bag and ran right up to him, her shoes squeaking away on the polished tiles. The hug she gave him nearly bowled him over.

'Uh... okay,' he laughed. 'Nice to see you too!'

'Don't go.'

'Dinah...?'

'Don't do it. I'm going to miss you. We're all going to miss you so much.'

Teal hugged her back. 'Hey, it's okay. Everybody goes away sometime. It's not like the sky'll be falling down the second I'm gone. Look on the bright side. You've got the Out and Out Parade to look forward to, and Nidah'll be more than enough to keep Mr Jeffries in check at work. You know what

he's like...' But Teal trailed off. After all, she didn't. She still had no idea.

He knew he had to tell her about him, but he couldn't bring himself to do it here. In his head, he promised that it would be the first thing he'd do when he got back. 'So don't worry,' he said, reassuring her with a broad smile and a few pats on the back for good measure. 'It's all good, right?'

She wiped her eyes and nodded. 'Yeah, it's all good,' she sniffed. 'You know, you're pretty brave.'

'If you think that's brave, you should meet the pilot sometime.' He laughed, scratching his head. Even in the current political climate, it was a little much. 'But thanks, I guess. It was great seeing you again!'

Long after they'd parted ways, Teal found himself hurriedly scanning items through the self-service checkout. He stopped for a moment and put the carton of Sans-Fox down.

'Wait, she knows I'm coming back, right?'

Home

'I'm back! And you won't believe what I've brought back with me!'

'Teal, where the hell have you been?'

'Getting you a veritable banquet!' Teal kicked off his Wellington boots and heaved the bags into the kitchen. Two slices of chicken loaf were plunged into the toaster before he even got started on the sopping shopping. 'So you've got fried rice, fresh salmon fillets and crab tacos to start with. It's no crab salad, I know, but at least there's a real mix going on. It's important not to get bored, you know?'

'Teal—'

'And I know you don't have much of a sweet tooth, but tea

without dessert is depressing, so I got a few berry compotes in, as well as some baum cake, which I know you like, so you can't complain. And before you say anything, it's not the cheap, nasty stuff. This is the real deal, made with proper sap and everything...'

'Teal, we've got to leave right now!' His father rifled through the packets on the counter. 'And you're only going for a week. You don't think I'm going to starve to death on my own, do you?'

'Not with all this!'

His father took off into the hallway, marching as fast as his braces could carry him. Teal's ears drooped. He wiped his wet paws on his jeans and stopped unpacking for a moment. He could hear the buckles on the leg braces clacking over in the next room. 'What's wrong?' he called.

'Key check?'

'Yep.'

'Phone check?'

'Yep.'

'Wallet?'

'Got it.'

'Suitcase packed?'

'Last night.'

'With the prize pack?'

'Of course. What's up—?'

Teal jumped as the toast sprang up behind him. He grabbed some butter from the fridge and started plastering each slice.

His father stomped into the kitchen. 'What part of "we've got to leave right now" don't you understand?'

Teal stared between his father, the toast and the butter knife in his paw. 'I just got back. I was going to make myself

some chicken toast...’ His father grabbed him by the arm.

‘We have to go.’

Panicking, Teal shoved it in his pocket. ‘Now?’

‘Now!’

Emmett dragged him into the hallway, where his rucksack and suitcase were waiting. ‘Okay, but make sure you eat a solid three meals a day while I’m away. And don’t be afraid to ask for help from Mama Poss if you need it.’

‘We’re going to be late!’

‘Oh, and make sure you keep an eye on the flowers after you water them. There’s this moth...’

Car

Rain thundered down upon the roof. At first, the noise seemed almost deafening, but over time, it began to meld with the hum of the engine to create a kind of slow, sleepy drone. On any other day, it would have been a standard morning drive through Opus City. But not today.

‘Thanks for the lift, Dad.’

At the front, one paw lifted briefly from the steering wheel to adjust the rear-view mirror. It squeaked indignantly in protest until it was fixed back into place. Then, the car was quiet once more.

‘I really appreciate it.’

He grunted and flicked the indicator on. The car wheels screeched as he made a turn.

‘It would’ve sucked to walk...’

Little could be seen of the outside world through the thick sheet of water over the windows. But one thing was certain. It was dark, it was grey, and it was miserable. Occasionally, there would be a blinding flash, which was always accompanied by a distant rumble a few moments later.

Inside, the car radio played quietly in the background, fizzing away. Every time the car hit a pothole, it cut out for a moment, and then, slowly but surely, the radio station would tune itself back in. On that day, there was a great deal of tuning going on. It ended up sounding more like static than music.

‘Whatever I did, I’m sorry.’ After a few moments, there was a reluctant sigh from the front. Then, a clink. One of the leg braces must have brushed against the seat.

‘How much did you spend?’

Teal looked up in surprise. This was the first time his father had spoken. ‘What?’

‘How much did you spend on all that stuff sitting on the kitchen counter?’

‘Oh. Uh... not much.’ Teal was almost embarrassed to be telling the truth. ‘Nothing crazy. Trust a student to make a little go a long way.’

Emmett sighed again. ‘This is really important, T. Your mother and I saved for years to put that fund together. That money was meant for you.’

‘I know. But that means I have to be able to spend it however I choose. Otherwise, it’s not a gift. Thrifts barely touched the sides of what was in the envelope, I promise. I just needed to know that you’re not going to skimp out on anything important when I’m gone.’

‘Teal, I’ve been around for a long, long time now. Do you really think I’d be living on crumbs on my own?’

‘You used to. Some days, when I was still a kit. When times were tough.’

For a while, the car returned to silence. Teal almost preferred it. Closing his eyes, he sat back in his seat with his tail curled around him and tried to let the soothing sound of

the rain wash over him. But the lull couldn't last forever. It was just a question of who was going to break it first.

'You're hiding something from me.'

Teal's eyes shot open. A cold chill ran down his spine.
'What?'

'I know we don't talk about everything; we Arkes have never been the gossiping kind. We get on with it. But there's something going on with you, and I think it's been bothering you for a long time now. I can see it every time I look in your eyes, and it kills me, so I can't imagine what it's doing to you. Son, there's something I've got to ask you, and I need you to be honest with me. Is there something you'd like to tell me?'

All of a sudden, it felt like there was a vice over Teal's chest. With every second, it clamped down just a little tighter. He'd been dreading this moment for years, and yet it still hit him harder than he ever imagined. Could he simply say no? Of course he could. But he wouldn't. The moment he met the concerned eyes of his father in the rear-view mirror, he knew that it was time. Whatever happened now, he wouldn't lie to him again.

'Yes...'

His lungs refused to cooperate. All he could do was sit there with two glassy eyes, trying to numb himself as much as possible to prevent the rising tidal wave of emotion from crashing over him. He had no idea what his father was going to say, if indeed he'd be able to say anything. What would he think? What the hell was his father going to think?

The car slowly came to a halt. For a moment, Teal's heart stopped dead in his chest. This was it. The end of the line. For all he knew, he was about to be thrown out onto the road.

Then, he looked out of the window, and he realised where they were. Emmett had pulled up right outside the terminal.

His father wrenched the handbrake up and turned around. Teal couldn't even bring himself to look at his face. 'Son, I've never seen you like this before in my life. What's going on? Is somebody threatening you?'

Teal shook his head.

'Trouble at work? Trouble at university?'

He stared down at the floor and shrugged. His eyes were burning; he could feel them welling up. He wasn't ready for this conversation after all. Not because he thought his father would hate him, or disown him, or even love him any less. But because he couldn't be sure. And if it turned out that he was wrong, he didn't know what he'd do. His dad meant the world to him. He was the only family he had.

'I've got to catch my flight,' Teal gasped. He threw the car door open and staggered out into the rain, slamming it shut behind him before his father could respond.

Holding a paw over his eyes, he splashed his way down to the boot. It took a few agonising moments of fumbling before he was finally able to get it open and drag his suitcase out. With two numb, shivering paws, he managed to extend the handle and wheel it back to the front, his socks squelching underfoot with every step. He was soaked to the bone.

Teal stood there for several seconds, breathing heavily in the relentless downpour. He had no idea what to do. The indicator light flickered on and off, a constant reminder that the car could pull away at any second. But it didn't. Instead, the window came down. His father leaned forwards.

'I'm here for you, son. You don't have to tell me what's wrong, but I can't help unless I know what I'm dealing with. In all your eighteen years, you've never done anything that's not made me proud of you.' At this point, rain was pouring down his face, but Emmett barely seemed to notice or care.

Again, Teal didn't know what to do. So he stood by the window and said nothing. The indicator ticked away in the background. *Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock...*

Time was running out, and Teal didn't have the luxury to sit around and think things through. He took a deep breath. 'It's... nothing. We can talk later, maybe. For now, I've got to go. But thanks for the lift!' He swivelled the suitcase around and began wheeling it towards the terminal entrance. His father called out after him.

'Wait, Teal! Teal!'

He stopped dead in his tracks and whipped around. 'Do you want me to be late?' he yelled back.

His father looked shocked. Raindrops slowly dripped from his glistening nose and drooping cheeks. Reluctantly, he pulled his head back inside and drew the window up. All Teal could do was stand by his suitcase and watch, squinting through the mist of the heavy rain. He'd never shouted at his father like that before.

A few moments later, and the car started to pull away. Teal fumbled for the suitcase handle and ran after it, panting wildly. 'Hey! Hey, wait!'

Whether his father could hear him or not, the car continued down the road. After a few strides, Teal came to a stop, watching it drive away until eventually, it was out of sight. He shivered several times, but he was pretty sure it had nothing to do with the cold.

'Well he definitely knows the truth now,' he sniffed. 'I'm an idiot.' He wiped his eyes. 'I'm so sorry, Dad. The second I get to the hotel, I promise I'll tell you everything.'

He took a moment to run a paw through his sopping fur, combing out as much water as possible. Then, he tightened his rucksack straps, grabbed the handle of his suitcase and got

ready to run.

After all, he had a flight to catch. And there was barely an hour left on the clock.

Wrenway Airport

It was big. It was very big. In fact, it was impossible not to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of voices echoing through the impossibly high glass walls of Wrenway Airport. There must have been thousands of footsteps all clattering together, which, combined with the squeaking suitcase wheels and monotone service announcements, served to create an entirely unique kind of headache-inducing cacophony.

Wringing his tail out over the welcome mat, trying his best not to sneeze, he couldn't help but think back to the decades of history he'd learned about the place.

The fact that it had been built in the forties as a military base, and slowly expanded outward with enough funding that it was currently seeking permission to start work on its sixth runway. The estimated one hundred million passengers that walked through those gates every year, and the various disasters and controversies it had suffered, like the attacks in 2003, or the infamous 2012 climate change protest by GreenPaws, in which three hundred protestors had removed their clothing and blocked access to the baggage-handling rooms for hours before being removed. Suffice it to say, the headlines wrote themselves.

With his history student cap on, Teal could have easily spent the rest of the day exploring. But there was no time for any of that. There were hundreds of digital displays dotted all around the airport, and every single one of them was counting down the time in perfect synchronicity.

It was exactly 9:01. His plane was due to leave at ten, and

it would be going whether or not he happened to be on it.

So he marched as quickly as he dared along the rows of airlines, dragging his suitcase behind him. There was so much empty space between the various self-service stations and check-in desks, he had to stop once or twice to catch his breath. The airport was in no danger of anybody trying to run through security. They'd have to make it to security first.

He made a note of each airline as he went by, crossing it off in his head. 'Flutterbyes, Cardinal Airways, VaquitAir, QuickFlings...'

But his airline was nowhere to be seen. He must have jogged past dozens of them, many of which he'd never even heard of, before finally, he found it tucked away right at the back of the room. It was just his luck. 'There it is! Heron Back Again!'

The Heron Back Again check-in desk had by far the smallest queue of the lot. Evidently, he wasn't the only one having trouble finding it, but on a day like this, he could hardly complain. He pulled up his suitcase and got ready for what looked to be, relatively speaking, a very short wait. It was just as well. In front of him, situated above the desk were at least three enormous illuminated digital clocks that slowly ticked away. They were very difficult to ignore.

There was nothing else to do in line, so Teal took the opportunity to catch his breath and take everything in. He'd never seen so many animals in one place before, and he'd lived in Opus City for eighteen years.

There were families of foxes, badgers and wolves all huddled together, trying to work out how the self-service machines worked with their tails thumping impatiently behind them. He followed one of them, a confused family of red foxes that flitted from machine to machine, only getting

redder and redder with every failed transaction. It was funny at first, everything seeming harmless enough, but when the son started shouting at the father, he had to look away. It hit him right in his gut.

He hoped the young tod would have the good sense to apologise before something else got in the way.

Elsewhere, there were old voles returning home, students travelling alone, and exhausted teachers minding ear-piercing classes of kits that could only dream of doing the same.

So many of them had clipped tails, he almost felt out of place, but the passengers that still had theirs weren't shy in the slightest about flaunting it. After all, tail room was extra.

He even spotted a few species wandering around that he couldn't name off the top of his head. He would have thought they'd garner a little more attention in such a public place, but nobody looked twice at them. For that matter, nobody looked twice at him. They were all too busy rifling through their documents or hushing their unruly brood to think twice about some blue fox in the queue.

It was a nice change of pace. He could get used to this.

'Thank you for choosing to fly with Heron Back Again.
Could I please see your passport and boarding pass?'

He blinked. 'Uh...'

There was no one else in front of him. The dormouse at the desk briefly lifted a paw from her keyboard to beckon him over, chewing away. Her eyes never left the screen. He pulled up his suitcase handle and hastily wheeled it up to the counter.

'Thank you for choosing to fly with Heron Back Again,' she repeated. 'Could I please see your passport and boarding pass?'

'Sure.' He picked them out of the prize pack and handed them both over, doing his best to sound neither too

enthusiastic, nor too casual. It was a tricky balance. Trying not to look suspicious only made things harder when that's exactly what suspicious individuals would also be doing.

For an anxious traveller, it was an absolute minefield. Teal just tried not to think about it.

The dormouse flicked through the documentation with pin-point accuracy. He could only imagine how much of it she went through over the course of a day, and yet she still hadn't looked up. It was only when her paw closed upon the picture page in his passport that she pulled her eyes away from the flashing screen on her desk.

'Everything seems to be in order. Please put your suitcase on the conveyer belt for measuring, Mr— Christ!' She almost swallowed her gum.

Teal felt a small twinge inside. He hadn't seen a reaction that bad in years. He scratched his head and tried to laugh it off. 'Not quite.'

Her cheeks were red. She quickly took her gum out and stuck it behind her ear. 'Sorry, Teal. Mr Arke. Sir. Please, let me help you with that.'

Before Teal could say anything, she was out of her seat and helping him to lift it up. She wrapped her tail around the counter, using it for additional leverage as they worked together to slowly heave it up and onto the belt.

'Thanks for the help.' Teal didn't really know what else to say. Around them, the other customer service agents were sitting stiffly behind their desks, patiently negotiating with passengers that were rooting through their open suitcases, surrounded by shirts and undergarments like an explosion had just gone off in a clothes shop.

'Oh, don't mention it. Especially to my superiors,' the dormouse smiled, quickly stepping back behind the counter.

After a quick survey of the room, she seemed at ease once more. ‘Malchromatism, right?’

Teal lowered his head. ‘Y-yeah. Congenital.’

She nodded. ‘Same. Whole family’s got it.’

‘You’re pretty lucky,’ he said. Her golden fur was immaculate, trimmed to perfection, and there were symmetrical white highlights around her ears and chin. She could have been a poster child for dormice the world over.

‘You think?’ she whispered. She leaned over and flicked her sleeve up. Teal gasped. The fur around her arm was dappled with brilliant black spots, each one circling a splotch of darker fur not entirely unlike that of a leopard. ‘Everything below the neck,’ she mouthed, and the sleeve fell back down, concealing the spots once more.

‘That’s crazy. I never would have guessed.’

‘Hey, that’s why I get to do my job. For some reason, it never affected my head. My siblings teased me about it for years. I guess that was one time when it really was better to be the odd one out. Ironically, it was the only way I could fit in.’

‘I don’t know. Standing out definitely has its perks too,’ Teal said. ‘At school, you’d get the whole table to yourself.’

The dormouse did her best not to laugh. ‘Everything seems in order, Mr Arke,’ she smiled. There was a low mechanical whine, and the conveyer belt began dragging his suitcase away. ‘Your gate number is D4, and your flight should be right on time. Just make sure you head over to security immediately to get yourself and your bags scanned. A few of the screeners are a little... hands-on, but if you join the third line, Lucas and the boys should see you through just fine.’

‘Thanks again,’ Teal nodded. ‘But I’ve still got time, right?’ His eyes jumped once again to the enormous digital doomsday displays above the counter. 9:12. ‘I mean, the flight

leaves at ten.'

'Yes, but they usually won't let you through security on an international flight if you're less than forty-five minutes from departure.' Teal looked up just as the clocks ticked over. 9:13.

'F-thanks for the advice!' He picked up his feet and made straight for airport security.

'Oh, and Mr Arke?'

Cripes, what was it now? Teal turned around in panic.

She was holding his passport and boarding pass in her paw.

Security

'It'll be fine,' Teal told himself, patting his pocket for the umpteenth time to check that his passport was still there. To his immense relief, it was. He moved up one in the queue. The passengers behind him was already preparing for the security scan.

Bending down, he grabbed at his laces, craning his neck around to see if anybody was taking off their shoes. They weren't. That was good to know. He let the laces flop back down. 'Just do what everyone else is doing, and it'll be fine.' There were a few plastic bins by the conveyer that they all seemed to be using. He blew his nose and tossed the last of his tissues into one of the holes.

It was a strange relief to see that everybody else was as tense as he was. The faces on the security guards were as cold and unyielding as the metal detectors. 'Why do I feel like I've already done something wrong?'

It didn't help that most of the security personnel were birds. They made no attempt to hide their clipped wings, and the irony of the whole thing was so transparent, he was sure the airlines did it deliberately. Nobody was going to try harder to keep a fellow animal grounded than somebody that had

already had their ability to fly so cruelly stripped from them.

He tried shooting one of them a smile, but they beckoned one of their colleagues over and muttered something to them. At that moment, Teal decided that it would probably be a good idea to never try that again.

Everybody seemed to be putting their possessions into a procession of plastic containers that inched along the conveyer belt. He followed suit, reluctantly parting ways with his wallet, keys and phone. He didn't need to check his other pockets; those were the only things he ever carried around. But he had no idea where the line was drawn. Would his belt buckle set it off? What about the buttons on his black and yellow jacket? If they were enough to trigger the alarms, what on earth was he going to do about his jeans?

None of the animals in front seemed to be having any trouble. A family of beagles had just been buzzed through without much fuss at all. He felt his anxiety quietly start to simmer. 'Uh...' He raised a tentative paw. 'Are metal buttons okay?'

The security crow standing by the metal scanner seemed to think Teal wanted to move through the detector. He waved him through with a wing.

'No, I don't...' Teal stuttered. But there was nobody in front of him. Everyone was still busy sacrificing all their worldly possessions to the conveyer god. He inched forwards against his better judgement. 'I just... want to know...' He tried to get the words out, but the security crow's gaze was burning into him.

'Is there a problem, lad?' The crow didn't raise his voice, but for all Teal knew, he was a moment away from raising an alarm. He couldn't tell. His strong Gaelyndic accent sounded friendly enough. But that didn't sound like a good question to

be asked in an airport under the best of circumstances.

‘N-no,’ Teal flushed.

The security crow took a few steps towards him and placed a wing on his shoulder, smiling reassuringly. He was tall. Very tall. ‘I know these bleepin’, bloopin’ gizmos can be a little intimidating, but we’re not about to start zappin’ yer fillings, or fryin’ any pacemakers, silver fangs, wing threads or iron claws. Just step through, and as long as yer not a dosser lookin’ to start something, you’ll be gravy. Do make sure to check your pockets though. A lot of folks forget that.’

‘Sure they do,’ Teal breathed. He’d already checked his pockets. Of course he’d already checked them, but he swiped through them one last time, just to demonstrate how compliant and undeserving of a set of handcuffs he was. His paws leapt quickly from pocket to pocket. Nope, nada, zilch, nothing, and even less nothing. Just as expected. Wait...

There was something in his back pocket. It was cold to the touch, and... oily? What on earth? His paw closed around it, and he felt his heart skip a beat. He knew exactly what it was.

It was the butter knife from breakfast. Teal had just brought a knife into the heart of the busiest airport in Lower Britannia. And he had no idea what to do.

The crow cocked his head. ‘Anything wrong, boyo?’ Teal shook his head emphatically. ‘Then step right up and let’s get you through this thing! Other folks are waitin’.’

Teal turned around and saw that he was holding up the line. They were all watching him now, and as the crow put a wing on his shoulder and ushered him to the metal detector, he felt the gaze of many strangers burning into him. He had to think of something, and he had to think of it fast. They were getting closer, and closer, and closer...

‘Wait!’ Teal halted. Both of his paws leapt to his belt.

‘This might set it off,’ he said quickly. ‘The buckle, I mean. Could I put it with my other stuff?’

‘Sure thing.’ The crow leaned in closer with an arched eyebrow. ‘First time flyin’?’ Teal could barely dare to nod. The butter knife was burning a hole in his pocket. ‘I can tell. But don’t be afraid. We’re only here to catch the bad guys.’

Teal just nodded. Inching his way over to the conveyer belt, he paused a moment to think through exactly what he was about to do. He couldn’t make a mistake. Not when there were so many eyes on him.

He took one deep breath. Then, he unclasped his belt and inched it slowly through each of the loops on his jeans. When he came to the back loop, he used both paws. Hiding his back pocket behind his forearm, he drew out the butter knife and pressed it inside the belt as he continued pulling it through. He looped the belt around itself several times.

Perfect – the butter knife was out of his pocket. Now, he just had to get rid of the darn thing. He walked over to the start of the conveyer, where the holes of the bins were waiting like open mouths. Yawning, he dropped the belt loudly into a container with one paw, using the distraction to slip the butter knife into one of the bins with the other. To his immense relief, there was no metal clink when it hit the bottom.

With bated breath, he paced back to the metal detector and stepped through it. Unceremoniously, absolutely nothing happened.

‘Grand!’ the security crow squawked. ‘Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?’

Teal shook his head and laughed haggardly. ‘Easy for you to say!’

Walking over to retrieve the rucksack and his other scanned possessions, he whispered an apology to his father.

That was a perfectly good piece of cutlery they were never going to see again. He was going to have fun recounting the story though, certainly more fun than it had been to actually go through it.

‘Stories are for life,’ Teal muttered, patting his pockets for the umpteenth time to check everything was in its right place. ‘I’ll buy you a new butter knife.’

He’d made it through security, but there was no time to reflect on the absurdity of what just happened. He followed the corridor at a brisk pace, only barely resisting the urge to break into a sprint. He was almost certain he was going to need to make a mad dash for the plane.

There wasn’t a single moment to spare. The seconds were ticking by.

Lounge

‘Oh my god, why is it taking so long?’

Teal had been sitting by his gate for ten minutes, and it was beginning to feel like the plane was never going to leave. Every second was like an hour.

‘This whole place makes no sense. You’re supposed to turn up half a day before your flight, but the second you get through security, you’ve got nothing to do except hit your head against the wall, or go around buying their stuff!’ On second thought, it made perfect sense. He sighed. There was only so long a fox could sit there, listening to music and picking away at his plasters. ‘At this rate, I’d do anything to pass the time.’

He turned his suitcase on its side and opened it up, only to be greeted with a huge stack of books from his coursework reading list. He quickly zipped it shut again. ‘Okay, maybe not everything.’

The digital clock over the D4 gate was set at 9:44. It had been stuck there for quite some time now; he wouldn't have been surprised to learn that it was broken.

His stomach seemed to groan in agreement. He hadn't eaten anything all day apart from a measly handful of sprat flakes. His head was so numb, and his throat was so dry. He could only imagine how the next ten hours in the air were going to be.

Barely stifling a yawn with his paw, he shrugged his earphones off and meandered over to the vending machine nearby. Hopefully, that would take up a minute or two.

With the last few coins in his wallet, he treated himself to a bottle of 3-Down, smiling at the familiar V-sign logo on the vending machine display. It had been too long since he last had a good bottle of marble soda. The coin slot ate every penny he could feed it, and when he keyed the code in, the bottle fell with a satisfying thunk against the plastic door. He slipped his paw inside and fished it out. It was so cold.

The marble top had barely been popped before he glugged half the bottle, hiccupping as the melon-flavoured bubbles went straight to his nose. The sensation was indescribable; Teal's whiskers practically stood on end.

It proved to be entirely too delicious for its own good. Another gulp, and the bottle was empty. The marble rolled around inside the empty glass. Teal sighed mournfully, wiping the condensation on his jacket. If he had any more change, he could have easily burned through another two of them, but he'd promised himself not to break any more notes until he landed in Sakurai.

Still, he twisted the top off and pocketed the gleaming green marble for luck. He was hardly a superstitious fox, but in less than an hour, he'd be thousands of feet up in the air. It

couldn't hurt.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. 'I swear, if this is another message from Finn asking me to try on the hats in duty-free...' He turned the screen on. But it wasn't Finn at all. It was his father.

Have fun out there. Stay safe. I hope the historian in you finds what he's looking for, and I hope the little kit in you knows that if you need help, I'll be there in a heartbeat, no matter what. You're my son, and I love you.

Also, currently unpacking your mess in the kitchen. You know you can get shopping delivered online now, right?

Teal chucked to himself. 'Thanks, Dad.' It was a long message too – his father had probably spent all that time typing it up. He sat back down by the gate and read it a few more times before bringing up the virtual keyboard. It was going to be a while before he'd be able to reply. He had to get this right.

I can only apologise for my outburst by the car. You didn't deserve that, and I'm sorry. It's just that things have been very stressful lately. I don't really know where to begin. Mum's birthday was tough, and it didn't help that a lot of other stuff's been going on. Stuff I haven't really talked about.

You were right. Things aren't okay at university, or at my job. But it's more than that. There's something I've been keeping secret for a long time now—

No, that wouldn't do at all. 'You know you get charged by the letter, right?' he muttered to himself, backspacing until he was back at the start. This wasn't a history essay. He actually had a point to get to.

I didn't mean to yell at you back by the terminal entrance. I'm sorry. But I was so scared. It's tough to know where to even start. Ever since I was little, I always felt like I was

different—

Nope, that wasn't going to work either. Teal couldn't possibly sum up so much in so few words, and coming out via text message was just about the worst idea he could possibly conceive of. That was going to need a long and measured conversation that he couldn't have without being face to face. For now, he had to keep everything simple. Only the barest of necessities.

I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'll explain everything when I get back, I promise. Take care. I love you too.

That was about as good as it was going to get. And no sooner had Teal pressed the 'Send' button than the tannoy system sounded above. His ears perked up to catch the sweetest words he'd heard all day.

'Gate D4 is now open for boarding...'

He was on his hind paws and in the queue before the announcement had even concluded. A few more pocket checks and he was good to go, holding his passport and boarding pass close to his chest. It felt good to apologise. Even though not everything had been resolved, there was a sense of peace to the departure that he hadn't realised he needed.

He felt his pocket vibrate again. That was strange. His father wasn't even that fast on a computer keyboard. He dug it out with his free paw.

Message not sent. Insufficient credit.

Plane

'If you could complete this passenger card, there's a ten percent discount off your next flight with Heron Back Again!'

Teal closed the overhead luggage compartment lid. The peacock seemed very enthusiastic, brandishing it about like a

winning lottery ticket, but all the enthusiasm in the world didn't count for much when he knew how terrible it was to work long hours in customer service. The only thing standing between that smile and an existential grimace of despair was a pay check.

'Well don't worry, because there's no danger of that,' he laughed. 'It's not like I'll be flying again for a long time.'

'They're also compulsory to all non-native flyers,' the flight attendant smiled, slipping one into his paw along with an old biro. 'But completing the optional questionnaire on the back will help you help us know how to help customers like yourself in the future.'

He shrugged. 'I guess I was in the mood for a doodle anyway.'

He got in his seat to let the flight attendant move past, leaning to the side to avoid getting swiped in the face by his magnificent plumage. All the flight attendants were peacocks. There were no peahens in sight, but he supposed it made sense. Flight attendants were the face of the airline, after all, and they made quite the impression.

But they were also the only staff Teal had seen at the airport that didn't have their wings clipped. He supposed it was because they couldn't fly far anyway, so regulations didn't apply to them. Their feathers were bright, full and altogether towering, much to the chagrin of several avian passengers who were also flying.

It took him a good few minutes to untangle the web of seat buckles he'd been saddled with. On a more expensive flight, each seat would have been custom fitted for each flyer, but he wasn't being forced to suffer under QuickFlings' cruel, penny-pinching wing, so he was in no mind to complain. One of the combinations seemed to fit him, so he clamped the

buckles over his waist and shoulders and tucked the rest underneath the seat.

There didn't seem to be much else to do, so he clicked the biro into action and got to work on the passenger card. He went down the lines, filling in one box after another.

'Am I bringing chemicals or biological weapons with me that could inflict irreparable damage on the Sakuranese ecosystem?' Teal read aloud. He tapped the pen against the card. 'I swear I know this one.'

As he blazed through the questions, he couldn't help but wish that the ones at university were anywhere near as simple as these. Then again, if that were the case, the degree probably wouldn't be worth the paper it was printed on.

The address was the only time Teal had to dig the information booklet out of the prize pack. 'The Ten Takai Palace,' he said, filling in the street name and post code. He couldn't wait to see it with his own two eyes. If the pictures were to be believed, he and his father could've lived quite happily inside one of the bathrooms alone, which, to Teal's immense excitement, all came with state-of-the-art fur-drying technology.

He couldn't wait to try it out. If he did nothing during the stay but have baths, it would still have been worth the trip—

Without warning, the plane jolted forwards, knocking the card clean out of his paw and onto the floor. He bent down to pick it back up, sorting through the tangle of belt buckles that were suddenly chattering like teeth. With the engines kicked into life, the entire cabin was vibrating. A few ahead of him, somebody's pup had just woken up. The cry was loud and shrill, not dissimilar to the mechanical parts of the plane that were whirring into action around them.

Sitting back in his seat, he pocketed the card and held

tightly onto the armrests with both paws. To say that he hated everything about the experience would be a severe understatement. The lack of leg room was the least of his problems now.

One of the peacocks came to the front to conduct the safety talk, but he just kept his eyes shut and tried to block out everything he was saying. There were only so many times he was prepared to hear the word ‘emergency’ when the plane already felt like it was going through its death rattle.

The old red deer couple behind him seemed to notice his discomfort. ‘First time flying?’ the doe asked him. She genuinely seemed to care, so Teal nodded. ‘Oh, you’ll be fine. It was my first time not too long ago, but it gets a lot easier. You just have to know the numbers, or so my husband says. He was a pilot once. Smuggled guns to rebels in the 40s inside giant crates of oranges. Isn’t that right, you old lug?’

The buck seemed more concerned with trying to get to sleep than anything, but a quick nudge in the side from his wife, and he was nodding wildly in agreement.

Teal took a deep breath. ‘The numbers?’ The plane jumped forwards, and he immediately closed his eyes again.

‘That’s right, the numbers. Hold on, I’ve got ‘em somewhere...’ She rooted around in her purse until she found a small lilac notepad. ‘Ah, here we are,’ she beamed, raising a hoof to adjust her beaded glasses. She flicked through the first few pages and cleared her throat. ‘The odds of a plane crashing are one in a million.’

Teal’s claws shot out, slowly scraping down the sides of the plastic armrests. She continued. ‘And the odds of actually dying in one are only one in ten million. According to the statistics on WorstAviationDisasters.org, plane crash victims—’

‘Please,’ Teal gasped, fighting to retract his claws and holding onto the armrests for dear life. Everything was shaking. ‘I don’t say this very often. But I need you to stop talking right now, or I’m going to have to knock myself out.’

‘Alrighty, calm your tail, son.’ The old doe took her glasses off, frowning sniffily. ‘I was only telling you not to worry. Planes are safer than cars, you know, especially now they’re not held together with tape and old gum anymore. Old gramps’ll tell you. You’ve got more chance of burning up in your kitchen, but you haven’t let that starve you to death.’

Teal cracked an eye open. While it was true that everything seemed to be juddering around him, nothing was on fire. There were no screams, not yet at least, and the plane seemed to be grounding to a halt anyway.

‘I’m sorry.’ He withdrew his claws and let his paws fall from the arm rests. ‘You’re right. I’ve just never done this before.’

The plane started moving forwards again, but this time, it was straight ahead. There were no sharp turns, and no more mysterious metallic screeches. Just a low rumbling. The scenery whipped past the window deceptively quickly. It didn’t even feel like they were moving that fast. ‘Yeah, it’s... it’s going to be alright. The plane’s got a smart, capable captain in charge, and we’re sitting inside the result of years of the finest Britannian engineering.’

Then, he heard the scrape of wheels underneath him. The entire cabin lifted, and Teal felt his stomach trying to escape his chest. All of a sudden, he was enclosed in a tubular metal coffin with only a few inches of steel between himself, and a hundred-foot drop.

‘I told you it’d be fine,’ the old doe cooed.

‘I’m going to die.’

* * *

‘If you could fold up your tray, sir, we’ll be landing soon.’

‘Wha...?’

Teal rubbed his eyes and sat up in his seat. It felt like they’d just taken off. The complimentary headphones lay bunched up on his lap, and the scant leftovers of his meal were still sitting in their shrink-wrapped plastic containers. An unseasoned tilapia fillet with a side of flatbread and a carton of redberry juice. It wasn’t exactly Teal’s idea of fine dining, but after running around for an hour on an empty stomach, he’d take whatever he could get.

He leaned over to the plane window beside him, the shutter of which was down. In fact, all the shutters around the cabin seemed to have been drawn down.

‘Standard landing procedure,’ the flight attendant explained.

‘Right...’ Teal scratched his head. He’d been sleeping on one side, and it definitely showed. His fur was a mess. ‘But I could open it for a minute, right? Just to take a peek?’ It took until he asked the question for it to really hit him. Sakurai was literally on the other side of that thin sheet of plastic. He could almost reach out and touch it.

But the flight attendant shook their head. ‘Sorry, sir. There’ll be plenty of time to see it when we land.’

‘I guess,’ Teal grumbled. He lifted the tray up and helped the flight attendant dispose of all the plastic containers.

‘Can I get anything else for you, sir?’

‘I’m good, thanks. Just looking forward to getting back down to terra fauna again.’

‘That makes two of us, sir.’

When the peacock was out of sight, Teal had half a mind to flip the shutter up anyway, but ultimately, he decided

against it. That high up in the air, it seemed better to stay on the safe side.

He straightened his ears and slipped the headphone sleeves over them, twisting the volume knob on the hard speaker shells in the middle. They'd made amazing time. According to the map screen, the flight had only taken them nine hours. They were early.

It was hard to draw his eyes away from the tiny aeroplane icon that slowly inched its way forwards across the water. On the fourth of February, at four o'clock in the morning, they were due to land in Nahashi. And according to the clock in the corner, it was already 3:52.

Teal had never been so ready to plummet thousands of feet in all his life.

The arrival was mildly terrifying, but he'd been above the clouds for hours now, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it anyway. So he held tightly onto the armrests and prepared for the worst.

Sure enough, he was shaken around like a cocktail and mildly throttled by his seatbelt. All over the cabin, ears were popping and stomachs were jumping. Bundles of belt buckles clattered away furiously underneath the seats. But after countless messages of reassurance from the pilot over the intercom, the plane wheels finally screeched down onto the tarmac, and everybody let out a collective sigh of relief.

Everyone except the red deer couple behind him. The old buck was barely holding his left antler together. The turbulence must have been the final straw. Beside him, his wife was rolling her eyes, entirely unperturbed with a pile of knitting in her lap. 'Well sizzle my tenders,' he grunted.
'Anybody got a tissue?'

'Don't worry, I've got some antler wrap in my bag!' Teal

swung his rucksack out of the luggage compartment and tore the grateful buck a few sheets, politely declining the offer to take the antler home at least three times. The old buck seemed greatly forlorn, but Teal could already hear Melanie lecturing him about just how much of a hygiene nightmare an unsterilised antler would become. ‘Honestly, it’s an amazing specimen. I just don’t think I have the space on my wall...’

He joined the queue to leave as soon as he could, checking his pockets compulsively to make sure he hadn’t missed anything the last four times. It wasn’t just that he couldn’t wait to get off the plane. After so much nervousness and anticipation, it still didn’t feel real to him. He had to see it with his own two eyes. Dinah said that the cherry blossom trees would be in full bloom. That seemed like a good start.

He followed the other passengers down a long, ribbed tube that wobbled slightly underfoot, and smelled strongly of rubber. It was brightly lit up, but totally closed off from the outside world. There were no windows, and no doors. Not even a sliver of light escaped through each of the connecting segments.

Slowly but surely, the procession of sleepy voices, clinking zips and squeaking suitcases meandered its way forwards. He craned his neck around the passengers in front, but there was no end in sight. The tube seemed to go on forever.

‘Come on, come on,’ he muttered. They’d been on the ground for what felt like hours, but he still had yet to see anything of the outside world. What he really wanted was to see a cherry tree up close, but at this point, he would have settled for a single blade of grass as long as it was real. To feel the wind on his face, and to stand on solid ground halfway around the world from where he’d spent every single day of his life. The anticipation couldn’t have been higher.

The other passengers were growing restless too, their groans resounding around the hollow tube, but luckily, it didn't seem like they had much further to go. Teal caught the tail end of a tannoy somewhere up ahead. It was a female voice, but whatever she was saying, it was too fast to make anything out. It didn't sound like Britannian either.

The hairs on the back of his neck slowly stood on end. He really wasn't in Lower Britannia anymore.

Moving further up the queue, he heard another tannoy, this one even fainter, accompanied by the hustle and bustle of airport activity that only grew louder and louder the more they walked. The air started smelling cleaner too.

There was one more stretch to walk before the next bend, and it was longer than any of the others. Teal felt like this would be the one. The other passengers started whispering amongst themselves with anticipation. He approached it with baited breath, trying his best not to fidget in line. Shivers were running up his spine. The sound of the outside world wasn't so muffled anymore. It was so close now, it was almost unbearable...

And just like that, he swung around the corner, and there it was. The end of the tube. With both paws clinging tightly onto his rucksack straps, he took a deep breath, and then stepped forwards, over the metal grate and onto solid ground.

He made it. At long last, he was finally here.

Nahashi International

He kept his eyes sharp, desperate to see his first cherry blossom tree around the next corner, but behind every clean, fluorescent, glass-panelled room was yet another clean, fluorescent, glass-panelled room. Nahashi International may have been halfway around the world, but at the end of the day,

it was still an airport. Teal was tired of the clinical walls and the slightly stale smell of recycled air. He wanted to see the outside world and get a real chance to stretch his legs.

Fortunately, the airport personnel seemed more than happy to help, courteously funnelling him and all the other non-native flyers straight to the immigration desk. His prior cursory internet search of the Sakuranese language didn't seem to be helping much here, but he'd already known that 'hello,' 'goodbye' and 'could you please point me in the direction of the nearest lavatorial facility?' were only going to get him so far.

Ultimately, he was grateful for their help. All of the signs, directions and warning notices were in Sakuranese, written in strings of complex, intricate characters instead of the letters he was used to. Were it not for the universal constants of the toilet symbol, vehicle pictures and arrows, he would have been truly lost. That was definitely something that made Nahashi International feel different.

It also seemed strangely quiet, until he remembered that the clock had only just struck four o'clock in the morning. He liked how peaceful it was. Compared to the madness of Wrenway Airport, it was positively serene. The Sakuranese airport personnel spoke to each other in hushed tones, and aside from a few vending machine clunks, the loudest noise came from the lights themselves, which buzzed overhead.

Teal ended up at the tail end of the queue when they made it to the immigration and customs desk, but luckily, one of the other advantages of a four o'clock landing was that the queue wasn't terribly long.

Eventually, the queue whittled down, and Teal was left on his own. A green pheasant was waiting there for him on the other side of the desk. There was something of the dragon

about him. His magnificent green feathers were impeccably groomed, glowing like iridescent scales along his wings and down his back. His wattle was blood-red, the deepest Teal had ever seen, and it only made the sharp gaze of his yellow eyes all the more piercing.

There was a single moment when he first saw Teal in which he seemed to flinch. One of his eyebrows arched in confusion, or perhaps it was suspicion. Whichever it was, Teal knew exactly what the problem was. He'd brought all the relevant medical documents with him if he needed them, but he hoped it wouldn't come to that. He was already incredibly self-conscious. Nobody liked being stared at. Not like that.

Luckily, the look disappeared, and the eyebrow went back down. Teal breathed a sigh of relief.

He beckoned Teal to come forwards, and when he was right at the front of the desk, he gestured for him to stop. Before Teal could ask him what to do, a flash went off, and for a good few seconds, everything was blinding white.

‘A countdown would have been nice,’ Teal moaned, rubbing his eyes and alternating blinking until the room started coming back to him. He would have understood a countdown, providing it hadn’t started higher than ten.

The immigration officer said something quickly to him, but he couldn’t understand a single word of it. Teal felt his stomach tighten. He should have brushed up on his Sakuranese more.

‘I’m... sorry,’ he stuttered in Sakuranese. At least, he hoped that was what he said. ‘Sorry’ sounded very similar to ‘happy,’ and the more he thought about it, the more he realised he should have been paying a lot less attention to how each word was written, and a lot more attention to how they were pronounced when he looked them up.

Luckily, the green pheasant seemed to recognise his accent. He laughed. ‘From Britannia?’ he asked. Teal nodded, red-cheeked. He didn’t think it would be particularly wise to go into exacting detail over the different nations of Grand Britannia, and how Britannia itself hadn’t existed for centuries. The pheasant seemed happy enough; that was the important thing. ‘Your Sakuranese? Very good.’

He leaned over with his wing and tapped a series of pictograms on the counter. The first one featured a cartoon shiba inu keeling back in horror from the photo flash coming from the desk. There was a big red cross through it. The second picture showed how to correctly have your picture taken. Teal rolled his eyes. That would have been handy a minute ago. The pheasant’s feathers were pointing towards the third picture, which showed the shiba inu handing over their boarding pass.

The officer nodded his thanks as he received it, checking it through and then tearing a small section of it off. He placed the rest inside Teal’s passport and stapled it shut. Teal flinched as the stapler’s teeth crunched through the book’s plastic cover. Hopefully, the customs officer in Wrenway Airport wouldn’t mind the extra holes.

The next pictogram showed the cartoon shiba inu pressing both paws into a pair of black casts, like they were having their prints taken during a police interview. Teal held his paws up to the rail in front of him, waiting as the green pheasant flicked through a series of different cast sizes. He pushed each one down the rail, the smallest barely the size of Teal’s palm, and the largest easily covering his head. The claw grooves were enormous.

He gulped. There were feral wilding species in jungles that didn’t have claws that big. At that size, all it would take to

separate someone's head from their shoulders was a foul mood, and a single swipe. Modern society was a miracle.

At least half a dozen cast sizes had been discarded before the immigration officer finally settled on one, running it along the rail to where Teal was standing and clipping it into the machine attached to the counter.

It was a sophisticated-looking device, complete with lasers that glowed forebodingly through the finger-sized grooves. Teal couldn't help but reflect on just how much it resembled a finger guillotine. He placed both paws tentatively upon the rests, hoping they'd still be intact when the process was over. Luckily, the plasters didn't seem to be a problem. A bright light went back and forth across his index fingers for several seconds, and then the machine gave an affirmative beep.

Whether the beep meant that he was cleared to go, or if they'd just detected that he was a world-famous criminal remained to be seen. Teal stood there, smiling at the immigration officer and waiting for the machine to stop making strange mechanical noises. The pheasant stared back at him.

There was little chance of small talk, but thankfully, it didn't take long for the machine to do its magic. It printed out a small form, which the pheasant passed on to Teal before waving him on with a smile. 'Welcome to Nahashi,' he nodded.

Teal nodded back. He made his way through the turnstile in a bit of a daze, holding his passport close to his chest. It took a few steps past the immigration and customs desk before it really hit him. He was here. He was actually here, hundreds of miles from home and all by himself. The realisation was like a small jolt of electricity. He couldn't help but hope that wherever they were, his parents were proud of

him. Both of them. This visit to Sakurai had been a long, long time coming.

After following a small hallway, the entire airport seemed to open up. This was more like it. More and more, it was starting to feel like anything was possible. He slipped a paw in his pocket and glanced at the form that the immigration officer had given him.

It was a clean bill of health. They'd been scanning him the whole time. 'I'm halfway around the world, and I don't have any diseases. Well how about that?'

* * *

He'd made a promise to himself not to get distracted, but that didn't last long. There was an amazing exhibit about the history of Nahashi, featuring ancient paintings, scale models and even a short film that charted its development from a small fishing island all the way to the present day. He followed the display along, watching the industry and technology explode outward from such humble beginnings.

He was utterly unrepentant of his history student sensibilities, taking picture after picture of each era. He could have easily stayed there for the whole day. It was fascinating.

'The island of Nahashi has long been proud of its independence,' he read through the glass, following the subtitled Britannian text along. 'And to this day, contentions remain over whether the island is to be counted as part of mainland Sakurai, or considered a separate, self-governing state. These tensions, which were supposedly laid to rest following a failed rebellion during the Sakuranese Civil War of 1670, recently resurfaced when the last natural formations linking the two islands fell into the sea in the early 1940s. Wait...'

Teal's eyes narrowed. He skipped back a few steps to

double-check the map. ‘Don’t tell me I’m not really in Sakurai yet!’

But the map did him no favours. It clearly showed the artificial land that had been constructed to link the motorways and train lines between the two islands. Apparently, there was a border after all. It was small and unpoliced, but no less real because of it. He’d been wondering why the immigration officer had welcomed him to the small island of Nahashi, instead of Sakurai itself. It seemed he’d found his answer.

‘Ten hours of flying,’ he sighed, ‘and I’m still—’ He was interrupted by a yawn too big to stifle. ‘Still not there yet.’

But it did no good to linger on the matter. After all, Sakurai wasn’t getting any closer. With great reluctance, he took his last pictures of the Nahashi history exhibit and left to collect his suitcase. Luckily, the airport was colour-coded, so he made it to the luggage carousels without much trouble.

‘Station four,’ he muttered to himself, digging his plane ticket out of his pack. ‘My suitcase should be in the yellow sector at station four.’

And sure enough, it was. The only problem was that it was a tall, black, unassuming suitcase in a sea of the things. The first time, he only realised he’d made a mistake when he unzipped it to put his prize pack away. After seeing what was inside, he closed it and quickly heaved it back onto the conveyer belt, red-faced. ‘Evidently not,’ he wheezed.

By the time his suitcase finally came around, he was the only one still waiting. ‘Right,’ he said, heaving it off the carousel and extending the handle. ‘Now I know why so many animals buy souvenirs. When I get to Takai, the first thing I’m doing is plastering this thing with key rings and stickers. It’ll be positively fluorescent, practically radioactive in its flamboyance, but the one thing it won’t be is like all the other

bags...'

After getting it checked out, the only thing he had left to do was to change his money. Luckily, Dinah and Nidah had given him a few pointers before he left. He swiped through the list on his phone to find the right one. It pointed him to the perfect place.

There were a dozen brand-new cash converters, all of them glinting and spotless amid a sea of vending machines that sold anything he could have asked for. There were vending machines for pizza, vending machines for umbrellas, tail protectors, wing guards, and even one that sported an adorable picture of miniature gecko pets in their own tiny habitats. He had his suspicions about what was inside, but he wasn't so sure he really wanted to know.

Teal followed the seemingly endless line of vending machines from room to room. They were all glowing, making noises, playing music and otherwise doing anything they could to entice him, but even as his own tail twitched with curiosity, he resisted the urge to take a closer look.

Instead, he continued past them. The further along he went, the older they seemed, until finally, he arrived at a cold room with blinking fluorescent lighting that seemed entirely unlike the rest of the airport, a place that had either been overlooked by the maintenance crews, or else deliberately ignored.

There, he found three battered green machines, each with a pixelated black-and-white monitor. These were the ones Nidah had told him about.

He walked up to the first one, relieved to see that the menu was subtitled in Britannian. The operating system looked like it was at least thirty years old. If it broke down after taking all of his money and he ended up starving to death, he vowed that Nidah would be the first animal on his haunt list. It didn't help

that knowing Nidah, she would probably find it more fun than he would.

Holding his breath, he prayed for the best and clicked the start button. It beeped loudly, instructing him to insert the money. He looked around to make sure no one was watching him, but there was nobody in sight. Unsurprisingly, the cold, dingy, flickering backroom didn't seem to be as popular as the rest of the airport. He was alone.

Carefully, he extracted the small red envelope from his suitcase and opened it up, keeping it close to his chest. He held the first ten-pound note to the machine like it was an offering. It sucked it up hungrily and displayed the currency on the screen. After the fourth, he decided to just cover his eyes and insert the rest blindly. It didn't feel right to be totting up a gift from his parents like it was one of his wage slips.

The machine certainly didn't seem to care one way or the other. It took everything he could give it, and before long, it had reduced the entire wad to a single banknote.

Peeking between his fingers, he pushed it into the machine, letting it go as it sucked it in with another approving beep. That was everything. He held one paw over the final total and navigated through the menu to the 'convert' button.

There was a loud whirring, and then one of the slots dropped a receipt onto the floor.

'Uh, okay. Thanks, I guess.' He bent over to pick it up, and the machine spat a small coin that hit him right in the back of the head. 'Ow! Hey!'

Rubbing the tender spot, he picked the coin up and turned it over in his paw, glaring at the converter. After a few buzzes, it seemed to go silent. He waited for a few moments, but nothing happened. The machine was dead. His worst fears were being realised. 'No, no, please don't die on me. Come

on...' Teal tried pressing more buttons, but the screen had gone blank. He was getting desperate.

'Come on, damn it!' He gave it one good kick, and suddenly, sen notes were streaming out. 'Oh god...'

He pressed himself against the machine, but the notes just kept coming, pouring out of his paws and over his arms. It was all he could do to kick the notes back towards him as they splayed out across the floor. The whole thing was absurd, like some sort of gameshow prank. He could barely stuff one handful of notes into the envelope before three more appeared, but he kept going. He had to try.

The envelope was fit to bursting when the machine finally came to a halt, heaving a weary mechanical sigh. He held his paws up to the dispenser, and it coughed a few coins that he swiftly pocketed. He held a paw back out, but this time, he was greeted only with silence. 'Is it over?'

It didn't seem to be making any more noise. He crouched down cautiously, checking the dispenser slots one by one to make sure nothing had been caught in the mechanism. Without warning, the machine belched a final red coin at Teal's head, which he caught this time with a triumphant paw. It made a sound like a sigh, and then slowly wound down.

It was finally done. 'Much obliged,' Teal said, and he gave the old thing a pat. He wouldn't be leaving until he'd counted every bill anyway.

Arranging the notes in order of value, he couldn't help but notice that there were some very large numbers printed on the corners. He felt almost like a millionaire. He dug the receipt out of his pocket to check the final figure. Alright, not quite. But it wasn't exactly a million miles away either. He was a darn sight closer here than he'd ever be in Lower Britannia.

He did the maths in his head. His yearly salary working in

O-Bun Sesame would easily make him a millionaire in Nahashi. That was a nice thought.

But then again, it probably cost a few hundred sen to get a can of Mr Paprika, so it was all relative. At that rate, you'd need a wheelbarrow of cash if you ever wanted to buy a car. And a house? Forget it. You'd probably need a house just to hold it all in...

He shook his head. He was getting ahead of himself. He wasn't even in Sakurai yet. There was somebody he needed to meet, and he wasn't sure they'd appreciate it if he kept them waiting. So with his wad of bills and handful of coins burning a hole in his pocket, he made for International Arrivals.

It turned out to be the busiest part of the airport. There were huge clusters of families, fiancés and even a few chauffeurs waiting together, and so many of them were waving, whistling and otherwise doing anything to attract the attention of the animals they were picking up, it was difficult to know where to look. For a few confused moments, Teal felt like he was right back in Wrenway Airport.

'How am I supposed to know who to meet?' He stood his suitcase up, dug out the prize pack and rooted through the instructions. He'd followed them all to the letter, but now he needed them more than ever, they were suddenly vague. All they said was that somebody at arrivals would take him the rest of the way. There wasn't even a physical description. The species would have been nice.

'They're asking for the impossible here,' he muttered, looking back up to find someone holding a large cardboard sign with 'Competition Winner' in big, bold letters. He grinned. 'But give a fox long enough, and he'll figure that out too.'

Sticking the prize pack under his arm, he wheeled his

suitcase along and waved a paw at the representative, holding up the prize certificate as proof of his identity.

‘Hey!’ he called above the racket. ‘I’ve just come from Lower Britannia, and I’m pretty sure I’m your competition winner! ’

‘Yes, yes, come quickly.’ The representative was far more formally dressed than Teal had been expecting, given the somewhat stingy nature of the prize. Now that he was here, it seemed the University of Takai were pulling out all the stops.

They’d sent a short, but nonetheless very official-looking chauffeur, complete with a slightly baggy suit, dark glasses, a cap and white gloves. Most of his face was obscured behind a silk scarf, but Teal could easily see that he was a raccoon dog; the eye markings around the glasses gave it away almost immediately. He wondered why he was wearing the scarf. It must have been cold outside.

‘On behalf of the university, I cordially welcome you to our shores, and yada yada, you know the rest,’ he said in a gruff voice that sounded vaguely familiar. His accent was utterly unplaceable. It sounded like it came from everywhere. ‘The important thing is that you made it, so congratulations! ’

The representative gave a hasty bow, and his clothes parted. A string of coins hung from his waist. Teal eyed them curiously. If nothing else, it seemed like an ingenious way to store your tips. Customers would be able to see exactly how much the previous ones had given, putting pressure on them without the driver having to say a single word. ‘Thank you for the warm welcome,’ he nodded, still staring at them as he filed the certificate away to hold his free paw out. ‘It’s amazing to be here. My name’s—’

‘Not as important as getting there on time!’ Before Teal knew it, he was being dragged through the crowd by his paw.

His suitcase clunked along the floor, teetering on its wheels.

‘But I arrived an hour early,’ he gasped breathlessly. The representative let go off his paw and marched on ahead. Teal struggled to keep up, fumbling with his suitcase handle and jogging along behind him. ‘I don’t understand! ’

‘You really are new here, huh? Well that’s just how we do things. The plane may have been early, but are we going to make it to our destination an hour early?’

Teal stopped briefly to check the clock on his phone. He’d lost more time at the history exhibit than he wanted to admit. ‘Probably not.’

‘Then we’re late.’

‘Ah.’

‘Ah is right.’

‘I’m sorry. I just thought we had more time than that. I still don’t even know your name.’

‘Good.’

‘Good?’

‘What, are you deaf?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Then you heard me. Frankly, you can call me whatever you want, because I guarantee I’ve been called worse. Plenty of time for us all to introduce each other when we’re dead, and there’s nothing better to do. Until then, my job is to get you where you need to be, exactly when you need to be there.’

He looked back at Teal, who was confused, flustered and struggling to keep up. Behind the silk scarf, his expression seemed to soften. ‘Look, if it matters that much to you, you can call me Ki.’

‘Ki?’

‘Yeah, Ki. As in, “keep on like this, and you won’t have to

put up with me much longer, because I'll be out of a job.””

‘Got it. Ki?’

He sighed. ‘Yeah?’

‘Forgive me, but you don’t sound much like a chauffeur.’

Ki laughed. ‘Oh, I’m not. My boss would definitely agree with you there. Just the janitor, in a manner of speaking, picking up after everybody else’s mess. This whole thing was arranged at the last minute. Sometimes, it feels like I’m the janitor of the whole damn universe.’

At long last, they pushed through the crowd and made it to the end of the room. Teal stepped forwards onto the entrance mat. The automatic doors parted, and the cold wind hit him like a brick. He shivered.

The air was so clean and crisp. Even without looking, he could tell that they were surrounded on all sides by pastures. The grass was long, fragrant, and dotted with small patches of wildflowers. Teal took a moment to breathe all of it in. After spending so much time in stuffy walls, it was like his nose was finally unblocked again.

He squinted in the darkness, doing his best to shield his eyes from the sickly fluorescent lights surrounding the entrance. There wasn’t much to see beyond the small car park. A few flickering lamp posts here, and a few rural roads there. The airport itself was tiny.

But wait. In the distance, just before the faintest outline of a bridge, there was a silhouette of a long line of trees. Their impressive boughs were tall and broad, dotted with countless flowers that swayed ever so slightly in the breeze. Were those... were those his first cherry blossom trees? He raised his nose to the air and sniffed, but it was too far to tell. He had to know for sure.

He left his suitcase where it was and followed the

pavement, meandering forwards like he was in a daze.

‘Hey, where do you think you’re going?’

‘I’ll be right back!’ he called. ‘I’ve just got to see this.’

Ki tossed his suitcase into the boot and slammed it shut behind him. ‘You think this is the only place in the country that has trees? Trust me, we’ve got plenty of trees. We’ve got so many, you’ll be sick of them in a week.’

Teal slowed down, his shoes scuffing against the concrete. ‘You promise?’

‘What?’

‘Some of my friends have been here before, and they made it very clear just how small the window is. Cherry blossom trees aren’t around forever. Do you promise I’ll get to see them in Takai?’

Ki shuffled around uncomfortably. ‘Look pal, I’ve got a thing about promises...’

‘Then give me a few minutes, and I’ll just run back,’ Teal said. He picked up his hind paws and broke into a jog.

‘I promise!’ Ki called after him. ‘Cross my heart and hope to croak. Now will you please get in the car, so you won’t have to explain in your pigeon Sakuranese why you made us so late!’

Teal came to a halt. He hesitated for a moment, staring out at the trees shrouded in darkness. Then, he turned around and made his way back to the car. It may not have been peak blooming season in Takai, but at least he’d be able to see them out in full force as they drove by the fields of Nahashi. It was better than nothing.

He got in the passenger seat by the driver and closed the door behind him. The windows were tinted. ‘Darn it!’

Roads

The journey was a quiet and contemplative one. Teal kept mostly to himself, bobbing his head to the latest Chick Cudi album that blared through the earphone on his right ear. The other hung down over his chest. Things hadn't turned out quite how he expected, but even after a long day, he couldn't help his burgeoning excitement. He still had a whole week ahead of him. Takai wouldn't know what hit it.

Foliage rustled past the window, and dirt crunched underneath the tyres. The sounds were the only sign that anything existed in the black void beyond the tinted windows. Nothing could be seen, only heard, and even then, the car would fall into long stretches of silence that the world seemed very reluctant to intrude upon.

The driver was no exception. Ki was quiet. Very quiet. He kept his eyes on the road and spoke very little, except to ask the occasional question.

‘So what do you think of Sakurai so far?’

‘I’ll tell you when we get there.’

‘Hmm. Not bad.’

‘I certainly hope it’s better than that.’

‘You got any family?’

‘Yeah, my dad. I got lucky. Best dad a fox could ask for.’

‘You two close then?’

‘When we’re not hundreds of miles apart.’

‘What’s life like back in Britannia?’

‘No clue – I’ve never lived anywhere else. But I guess it’s alright. Busy, loud, hectic and all the rest of it, but at least you could never accuse it of being predictable. Now that I think about it, maybe I take it for granted sometimes. It’s just hard when the world’s throwing everything at you. Work is tough, and studying soaks up every second of spare time like a sponge.’

‘You study?’

‘Yeah, history. I’ve done a few modules on this place, actually.’

‘Surprise me.’

‘Well it’s mostly recent stuff, like the 1881 Foreign Animals Policy. But there were some fascinating battles too, like the Great Gunpowder Siege in 1568, and the Sakuranese Civil War of 1670.’

‘1669,’ Ki corrected.

‘Are you sure you’re remembering that right?’

‘Positive. I never forget a date,’ he grinned. Even behind the dark glasses, Teal could see the glee in his eyes.

‘You know, your voice seems really familiar.’

‘Yeah, well you westerners all sound the same to me too.’

‘No, that’s not—’ Teal’s cheeks flushed. He looked away and promptly clamped down on his tongue.

‘Easy, partner, I was just pulling your tail.’

Teal kept his mouth shut. It was going to be a while before his cheeks stopped burning. This was the closest to red he was ever going to get. The return to silence was an enormous relief, though this time, it didn’t last as long.

‘Hey... what’s it like to have a family?’

‘What?’

‘I never had one. I guess I never really thought about it before now. What’s it like?’

‘Oh. Well, it’s tough to explain. Half the time, you want to kill them and they want to kill you, but at the same time, you’d do absolutely anything for each other.’

‘That sounds torturous.’

‘It is, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.’

‘I see. And what are chocolate fish like?’

‘What?’

‘Never mind. Forget I asked. I’ve got a more important question anyway. What do you want? When all’s said and done, where do you want to end up? What are your dreams?’

‘Well I had a great one on the plane where I could walk on water and float through the air. I forget how it ended, though...’

‘You know what I mean.’

Teal sighed. Of all the times to be asked a question like that, it had to be now. ‘I don’t know. I want to make my family and friends happy. I like to think I’ve done okay so far. But I could be doing better. There are some things they don’t know about me that could change things forever. So I guess if I could be myself without them being ashamed of me, that’d be awesome. I’d take that over Christmas any day.

‘Also, it’d be a neat surprise if I turned out to be somebody. Anything less, and I think everyone would be disappointed in me. But it’s too late. I’ve got a job on the weekends to help pay for my history degree, and both are about to go up in smoke. I’ve already screwed things up too much.’

‘I don’t know about that. Things could always be worse.’

‘How could they possibly be any worse?’

‘Well for starters, you could be the one at the steering wheel.’ Teal looked away. ‘You seem like a good kid. There’s clearly a head sitting on those shoulders. Start using it, and you might just turn out to be someone yet.’

‘That’s easy for you to say.’

‘It is. Easiest thing I’ve said in forty years. Does that make it any less true?’ Teal didn’t have anything to hit back with, so he kept his silence. ‘I think you’re braver than you realise. Might not see it yet, but you will. One day. And on that note...’

The car gradually drew to a halt. He pulled the handbrake

up. ‘We’re here.’

Teal rubbed his eyes. They couldn’t have arrived yet. They hadn’t been driving for very long. He scratched his head and undid his seatbelt. Cautiously, he plunged the car door handle and inched it open. Light spilled in through the crack.

Teal shouldered his rucksack and levered himself out. His legs were a little numb from the drive, but once he saw what was outside, it was the last thing on his mind.

‘We’re here,’ Ki repeated, thumbing his cap with a grin.

‘Here?’ Teal spun around, making sure to do a comprehensive sweep of all the glinting treetops, the endless dewy meadows, the overgrown, grassy fields and the single, solitary shack nearby. There wasn’t a single cherry blossom tree to be seen. ‘We’re in the middle of nowhere!’

Shack?

‘Hey, speak for yourself! Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a nice bit of nowhere these days? Somewhere on this crowded, shrinking rock where you’re not surrounded by all that honking and chewing? The city’ll drive you mad if you give it half a chance.’

After unpacking the last of his things, Ki trotted down the dust path with two gloved paws on his waist. ‘It might not look like it, but this place was worth its weight in gold.’

‘I agree,’ Teal said. It didn’t look like it at all.

It was a rundown mess, surrounded by a host of tiny grey statues. What little remained of the thatched roof was in tatters, and one of the sliding doors was hanging diagonally from the top. Over the doorway, beneath the weathered mask of a tusked, blue-faced demon, a wooden plaque had been nailed, but even if Teal could read Sakuranese, the writing had long since been worn away by the elements. Part of him

was relieved. Whatever the writing was, one thing was for sure. It was old. Very old.

Ki seemed to be able to read it just fine. He laughed and clicked his fingers at it, walking straight past the hut and only stopping by the small shelter next door. There was something parked inside, protected, if it could be called that, by a half-collapsed roof. One swift pull of the dust cover, and it was on full display for the world to see.

He whistled. ‘The 1970 Foxtail Duster 340. Beautiful, isn’t she?’

‘It’s definitely something alright.’ Teal took a tentative step closer, craning his neck to get a better view.

It didn’t look like it had moved since the 1970s. Dust caked what would otherwise have been a bright red coat of paint, and the car itself had the strangest look to it. The windows were positioned right at the back, arched with a gentle slope, and it was so low to the ground, it looked like it could take off at any moment, just like the flying cars that everybody had envisioned in the ‘50s.

‘Now if you’re going to be travelling through my land, you have to do it in style. I’ve been saving this beauty for a long, long time. Twist my tail and pinch my silver if this isn’t the most beautiful car you’ve ever seen.’

‘It’s alright, I guess.’

‘What? You don’t like it?’ He seemed genuinely taken aback.

‘No, it’s fine. Great, even.’ Teal had no idea why it mattered so much. He could have sworn they were in a hurry. ‘I’m just not a fan of cars in general.’

‘Or in particular, clearly. Ah well. It’ll be interesting to hear what you are a fan of. We can talk about it over a few bottles of good sake on the way. And if you can still talk after

a bottle of my sake, it'll be well worth hearing whatever it is you have to say.'

'Ah. I'm afraid I don't drink.'

'Not like this you don't!'

The raccoon dog ducked inside the shack, and for a while, he seemed to disappear. Teal could hear his muffled voice through the thin walls, but it was too faint to make anything out. He waited diligently by the car, but before long, his patience started wearing thin. Were they going to be late or not? And if they were, was he going to be on the chopping block for it? Curious, he crept up to the shack door and tried to get a peek inside.

'I screwed up!' Ki barked, throwing himself out of the doorway and scaring Teal half to death. The sliding doors teetered back and forth on their rails, an inch away from coming off. There was an old key fob in his paw. 'Listen, I've got to go right now.'

'I guess we should get a move on then,' Teal said, and he took a few leading steps towards the car.

'Yeah, you really should,' Ki said, tossing him the key fob. He barely caught it.

'What?'

'It's not far. Come on, where's that independent spirit of yours? You came halfway around the world on your own, and that was a hop, a skip and a jump. This is barely a tiptoe. Just follow the signs.' The stranger patted him on the back and started running back to his car, which was still running.

'You can't just leave me like this. The prize booklet said that someone would be there to help me get to Takai. I don't even know where to go.'

'There's a map on the front seat.' Teal was speechless. 'Look, I know it sounds like a lot, but you really can't go

wrong. Just follow the road, and it'll take you all the way to Takai Central. There's someone up ahead that'll get you where you need to be. Don't take any detours, and don't get distracted.'

Teal dropped the prize pack. It landed with a dull thud on the ground, sending dust flying everywhere. 'This is crazy.'

'No, what's crazy is that I should be back at the airport by now. There's something I forgot to take care of when you arrived, and I'm not gonna get any thanks for it either. Like I said, janitor of the whole damn universe. But we made really, really good time, and you're already more than halfway there. You've got this. Just... you know. Be quick about it. And don't scratch her up too bad.' He reached the car and grabbed at the door handle.

'Please don't leave me here.'

For a moment, Ki faltered. He let the handle go. The car door swung slowly open, bouncing one or twice on the hinges before coming to a full stop. 'Look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about this whole mess, I really am. I wouldn't be leaving if I didn't have to go. If I had any say about it, things'd be very different, but this is how it all shakes out. I'm just at the bottom of the heap. You didn't hear me say this, but it's the fox at the top you should be blaming.'

'The fox at the top?'

'Yeah.'

'And who's that?' he asked.

'My boss? You wouldn't believe me if I told you,' he said. 'He's a real piece of work. Count yourself lucky you'll never have to meet him.'

Teal looked around. It was fields, trees and dust paths as far as the eye could see. The horizon was veiled behind a faint mist. 'But I can't even read the street signs here. What if

something goes wrong?’

‘You got a pack, didn’t you?’ Ki nodded at the prize pack that was currently sitting on the floor. ‘That thing’s got every contact and emergency number under the sun. You think you’re in any kind of trouble, you just call them. But it won’t come to that.’

He stuck a thumb through the string of coins around his waist, bowing low before he closed the car door behind him. ‘Do what I do and trust the plan. Good luck, Teal. Godspeed.’

Without a moment’s hesitation, the car sped off down the path, the tyres kicking huge clouds of dust into the air. Teal coughed and waved a paw in front of his face. He bent down and brushed the dust of the prize pack, holding it in his arms and looking on as the car raced further and further away.

When it was finally out of sight, he found himself on his own by the shack, his rucksack sitting on his suitcase, the prize pack in his arms and the key fob to the old Foxtail Duster hanging from his fingers.

‘You didn’t even ask for my driving license,’ he said quietly. He put the prize pack away and rifled through his wallet. ‘It’s here, by the way!’ he yelled, holding it up so it glinted in the light.

After a while, his arm started to ache. He sighed and let it drop to his side. The keys clinked against his waist. ‘Okay. I guess this is it.’ He took a moment to gather himself together. This wasn’t how he thought things were going to happen. This wasn’t what he expected at all. But then what was life without a few surprises?

‘Come on, T. You can do this.’

After a cursory glance, the hut seemed empty, but he was still hesitant to snoop around inside. He didn’t want to be caught underneath the debris if its poor excuse for a roof felt

like collapsing.

When he eventually mustered up the courage, he was almost relieved to find absolutely nothing of note inside the single room. There were a few stacks of old newspapers, some old charms and a broad, half-empty bucket of water. That was it. He vowed never to think of his home in Dreamer's Eyrie as being too small or too humble ever again. His bed may have been a little short, but at least he had one.

On his way out, he noticed that there were bundles of dry holly leaf branches tied to the inside of each of the hut posts. That didn't strike him as being particularly strange, at least until he took a closer look. Sitting on top of each of the branches was an old sardine head.

Against his better judgement, he walked up to one, covering his nose. The tiny heads were just sitting there with their mouths wide open, gawping as though gasping for breath even in death. Their eyes were hard and callused, white and unseeing even as they seemed to stare straight through him. He shuddered. He didn't need to remind himself not to touch them. There was no danger of that.

One of the tiny stone statues was sitting right by the entrance. He bent down to get a closer look at it. All the statues around the shack seemed to be the same. It was shaped like an egg, but there were hundreds of tiny, jagged, intricate grooves all the way around it. It wasn't entirely unlike a pineapple, except that he'd handled many pineapples in his time, and there was absolutely no chance of him touching something with so many sharp edges. But it had its charms. It was even cute, in an odd, squat sort of way.

What was just as interesting was what he found right by the base of the statue. There were small, caramel-coloured chocolates strewn in the dirt, and the more he looked, the

more he noticed them all around the entrance, scattered about like somebody had thrown them all up in the air.

He picked one up and gave it a tentative sniff, recoiling at the smell. They weren't chocolates at all. They were beans.

'Strange...'

Brushing the dust off his paws, it seemed like it was finally time to stop procrastinating. He paced over to the old car, shaking his head at what little of his warped reflection he could make out underneath the crust of dust. A single paw scored through it like he was wiping thirty years away.

Luckily, the car door opened without much fuss. There was a crumpled map page sitting on the front seat. 'You've got to be kidding me.' Was he really going to do this?

He picked it up and got in, relieved and shocked in equal measure to find that the inside of the car was utterly pristine. When it was finally unfolded, the map covered almost the entire windscreen. 'I mean, I guess it worked for my grandparents. Then again, leeches and child labour also worked for my grandparents...'

Even without being able to decipher the official labels that marked the landmarks and roads in Sakuranese, it was still very easy to read. Somebody had circled the current location with a red pen, drawing a line all the way to the heart of Takai, which was also circled. 'So it really is just one road. One incredibly long, confusing and winding road.'

It felt strangely satisfying to be in the driver's seat. Teal hadn't driven a car since he got his license. You didn't drive in Opus City unless you cared more about the journey than the destination, because no matter how desperately you needed to be somewhere, you wouldn't be getting there in a hurry. But at least here, the roads seemed to be empty. Even after all this time, not a single vehicle had gone by.

‘You’d have to be a real screw-up to get into trouble on a road without any cars,’ he reasoned to himself. They even drove on the same side of the road in Sakurai, so there was no learning curve there. All the same, he reached down and patted the polished wooden gear stick for luck. Just in case. ‘Now let’s get this thing started. Shouldn’t be that hard.’

He took the key fob and tried to place it in the ignition. It didn’t fit. He turned it around, but it still didn’t fit. He tried it once more, and it went in smoothly. The car grunted into life. ‘Third time’s the charm,’ Teal breathed. This was going to be an interesting experience.

???

‘What the hell am I doing?’

Teal checked his wing mirrors periodically, but every time, just like the last hundred times, there was nothing for him to see but a long line of old telephone poles. The narrow path stretched endlessly in both directions, surrounded by still water and a thick layer of fog. Not a single car had gone by since he started driving. No motorcycles, not even a bike. It was a dead road.

The windscreen wipers groaned up and down, flicking aside any small flecks of rain that fell from the grey sky. So much for that weather forecast.

The map was sitting on the passenger seat, its four corners curled up along the crease lines like the legs of a withered spider. Keeping an eye on the road, he reached over and patted it back open. The view from the windscreen was identical to how it looked an hour ago. Had he even moved?

According to the map, he should have been less than twenty minutes away from Takai. He’d followed the road just like the stranger said. And yet there hadn’t been a single street

sign or landmark to break up the long drive. There were four international airports in Takai alone. You would think he'd have heard at least one aeroplane flying overhead by now, even if it was too cloudy to see one. But he'd heard nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.

For a moment, he pulled over by the side of the road, shutting the door behind him. Maybe he was missing something.

But if he was, how would he be able to tell? There was nothing behind him, and nothing ahead of him; the thick, swirling blanket of fog saw to that. It was impossible to see further than a stone's throw in either direction. He decided to take a short walk, leaving the car rumbling away so he'd still be able to hear it. It proved to be a comforting noise.

He paced down the side of the dirt path, careful not to stray too close to the water's edge. There was so much moisture in the air. Before long, he had to squint to make out the tail lights each time he looked back, and after a few dozen steps, the car had vanished from sight.

It was so still. All he could smell was dust. Aside from the engine somewhere behind him, and the slow, steady chirping of insects unseen, there was no sound at all, not even from the water. In different circumstances, it might have been serene. But not today. Today, every footprint sinking into the moist dirt felt like an intrusion.

He sighed. He wished Finn was there with him. It was his prize, after all. Finn would know what to do; he always knew what to do. In fact, he probably wouldn't have let them get into this mess in the first place. He may not have been able to memorise hundreds of years of dates and times in history class, but his instincts on the street were unparalleled. One look at that eccentric hermit of a driver, and they would have

been on the first train to Takai.

But it was too late for that now. All of this was wishful thinking. Teal was on his own, lost in a country he'd never been in before, and no amount of feeling sorry for himself was going to change that.

'I should have stayed home.' That said it all, really. He turned around, wiping a fine layer of rain from his face, and trudged back to the car.

The first thing he did when he was safely back inside was to go through the prize pack. There was no shame at all in asking for help when you really needed it, and the back of the pack listed several numbers that could be used in case of an emergency, including the university itself, the police and the fire department. The university seemed like a good place to start. He took his phone out.

Zero bars. There was no reception, absolutely none at all. Not even a network. His phone had opened on the message his father sent him. His reply was still sitting there underneath, greyed out. Unsent. He sighed.

He really was in the middle of nowhere, and when that final fragile sliver of battery dwindled down, he'd be on his own for sure. And after that? Well... some things just weren't worth thinking about. Perhaps it would be better if he turned around and made for the shack before night fell. From there, he could head back to the airport and sort the whole mess out.

'That sounds good,' he said aloud. It was comforting to hear a voice, even if it was just his own.

But before the words even left his mouth, he realised that he had no idea where the airport was. He reached over for the map page and frantically unfolded it. It was only a local map. The shack was right down by the bottom, circled in pen, and Takai was near the top. The airport was nowhere to be seen.

He couldn't even recount which roads the car had taken on the way there.

So he couldn't go back. There was only one direction he could take. Forwards.

'Onwards and upwards.'

The car spluttered back into action and he pushed on, his paws clenching the wheel. He couldn't drive forever.

To make sure he didn't miss anything, he held the map open on the seat beside him, tracing the route with a single finger. No, he couldn't have taken a wrong turn. It had been more or less a straight line since the beginning. He was starting to wonder whether the stranger had even given him the right map. But when it came to meeting new animals, Teal usually had a good idea of their character within the first few moments. He'd never been wrong yet, and every fibre in his body was telling him that however incompetent or overworked Ki may have been, he had only the best of intentions.

Maybe he had given him the right map, and it was just severely out of date. It looked about as weathered and beaten as the car did. Perhaps the roads had changed since it had been printed.

'But why give me his car in the first place?' It didn't make sense, especially when Ki had clearly been operating on behalf of someone else. No sane university would throw a car at someone in a foreign land and expect them to make their own way around, even if there were a thousand representatives stationed up ahead to help. That wasn't a prize. That was punishment, especially when a single train or bus ticket to the capital would have solved the entire problem. How cheap could they get?

If all this ended up being part of some Sakuranese game

show, he couldn't promise that he'd be able to refrain from swearing repeatedly on-air. But even then, at least he wouldn't be on his own. There'd be someone out there keeping an eye out for him. Somehow, he knew this wasn't the case. Even he wasn't that optimistic.

'I shouldn't be here,' he said. His foot pressed slightly firmer on the pedal. The dial was wavering on fifty kilometres per hour. 'I should never have come. I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry, Mum. I'm sorry, Finn. I should have just stayed home. I knew I should have just stayed home.'

Outside, the rain was getting heavier. Telephone poles swept by the window in a blur. The fog was thicker than ever, swirling over the calmest water.

'I'd rather be juggling fries at O-Bun Sesame right now. Heck, I'd rather be studying.' He laughed. It helped a little. 'And I never thought I'd catch myself saying that!'

At that moment, there must have been a hole in the road, because the entire car seemed to jump. In the boot, the suitcase made an audible thud as it fell onto its side, and next to him, the map bounced straight off the seat and disappeared into the floor space.

'Great...' Keeping his eyes on the road, he leaned over and patted around for it. When he finally found it, his paw closed around it and he brought it back up. He stole a quick glance at it. He was holding the wrong side. All the publication information was printed on the back. The publisher, the edition, the date...

The date! The date of publication was right there. February 6, 1970.

'I knew it was an old map!' he yelled, looking back up at the windscreen. 'That guy sold me down—'

Someone was standing right in the middle of the road. He

slammed his hind paws on the pedal. The car screamed, swerving dramatically to one side. It was too quick to process anything. He saw a flash of yellow, and then everything was spinning, and smashing, and crunching, and turning.

After a few seconds, there was a colossal splash. And then, nothing.

Author's Note:

'Thank you...'

Thank you for reading Chapter Three of *The End Where It Begins!* That's the end of Act One! I hope you enjoyed it! Keep your eyes peeled for the start of Act Two, which is coming soon!

This book is free, published online exclusively at www.t-larc.com, and there will never be any pay walls or barriers to entry. As a result, if you'd like to support me directly, it'd be awesome if you could chuck a [Ko-fi](#) or [PayPal](#) tip my way! It keeps me drinking tea and eating sandwiches, and I'd greatly appreciate any donations that you feel like sending!

But if not, that's cool too! You're already supporting me by reading and enjoying my stuff, so thanks a ton! And if you'd like to support the project in other ways, share the link, spread the word and get a conversation going on social media! Fan art and fan theories are both welcome!

So what are your favourite characters and scenes? Which secrets have you spotted, and what do you think is going to happen next?

Until next time, stay safe, stay kind, and as always, stay

hydrated!