

SHI

Volume One:

The End Where It Begins

Mae L. Strom

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– ACT ONE –

Flounder

Chapter Two:

‘There’s no way I’m going.’

Front Garden

‘There’s no way I’m going. No way. Not in a million years...’

He lay there with his paws behind his head, staring up at the night sky. At first glance, the blanket of darkness seemed impenetrable, but if he squinted for long enough, eventually, the tiny pinpricks of stars flickered through. They always did. ‘I’ve got too much work to do,’ he reasoned. ‘And I couldn’t leave my dad on his own. Or Finn. Still...’

He’d never been to another country before. Lower Britannia had been his home for eighteen years. He didn’t know what it would be like to look out of a window, and have no idea what he’d find on the other side. The thought of it twisted his stomach, but not entirely in an unpleasant way. It was something new. Something exciting. Maybe even a little dangerous...

‘I couldn’t afford it anyway,’ he said resolutely. He’d read the small print – all twelve pages of it. The plane ticket to Sakurai may have been free, but the trip to the airport wouldn’t be, let alone transport when he got there. Like any

capital, Takai wasn't known for being kind to your wallet.

And as for spending money, unless they accepted pocket lint and old buttons, he was fresh out of luck. He'd already taken out one loan for university, and it loomed large over him every day. One was enough.

That seemed to settle it. He breathed a sigh of relief. His ears flattened, and his tail swished in the grass. The gorgeous vistas and blazing Takai billboards in his mind's eye slowly faded away. This would just be another one of those things that ended up passing him by, like the school trips in secondary school, or the expedition to the Larenese mountains last year.

This was nothing new.

In the distance, the local jay's bell could be heard ringing out as she swept down rows of houses, delivering the morning paper. Teal smiled. He didn't see many birds anymore, but he couldn't blame them for keeping to themselves. After the kamikaze attacks of 2003, the cost of unclipped wing permits skyrocketed. Many families had been limited to living in no-flyover zones, or else resigning themselves to the ground.

And what sane bird would ever do that? Teal flexed his shoulder blades and tried to imagine what it would be like to have a full set of feathers twice his arm span behind him. Birds had every right to their prideful reputation. It was an enviable thing, to be able to take to the sky with nothing more than a good running start. He wouldn't need some free handout from a competition. He could fly to Sakurai himself.

'No, you idiot.' He rubbed his eyes. He thought he'd settled this already. 'Let it go. Delete that email, go to work and the world will still be turning. It'll be great. Then, you can hand your resignation into uni and pretend it'll all magically work itself out. Everything'll be just fine—'

There was a sudden screech behind him. Teal's heart skipped a beat, but when he looked around, it was only one of the neighbours leaving their house a few doors down. The front door sounded like it was one slam away from making a break for it, and when he saw who staggered out of it, he could hardly blame it.

It was the neighbourhood coyote. Red was barefoot, adorned only with an old set of boxer briefs, and fresh, if fresh was the right word, from what smelled like a six-month hibernation in a well-stocked whisky cellar.

The newspaper jay chose that exact moment to speed by. Her aim was unerring, and as usual, with her head bobbing to the music in her headphones, she didn't even bother to look where she was throwing them. It was deadly. Teal dropped to the grass just in time. He felt the wind move past his ears as the newspaper soared overhead and landed neatly on the doormat.

Red wasn't so lucky. His newspaper hit him square in the jaw, lingering for a second before falling neatly into his confused, outstretched paws. It was a small consolation that in his drunken malaise, he didn't seem to feel it in the slightest.

He held the newspaper up to his face and squinted at it, confused. Sniffing, he pushed it under his arm. 'Hey, what month is it?' he called out to Teal. The jay's bell rang out once last time, and then she disappeared around the corner.

'February,' Teal said.

'Right.' He scratched his back and swaggered off inside. The door shrieked shut behind him.

Teal shook his head. 'Actually,' he told himself, 'as long as I don't turn out like Red, I'm pretty sure I'll be happy whatever happens.'

He bent down to pick up his own copy of the paper. It was

nothing but the same old stories. Politicians were still trying to find someone to blame for the exploding population, the planet was still dying and another species had gone extinct, its final members dying in hospital a hundred miles away from where their homes had been bulldozed.

‘See,’ he muttered quietly to himself. ‘The world out there’s no better than the one right here.’

The sun was blossoming on the horizon. No matter how hard he squinted, he couldn’t make out a single star. Teal decided to head back indoors. He had to get his case ready. When his father was awake, he wanted him to agree with every word he had to say.

Home

‘I agree with every single word you said,’ his father nodded. Teal took a sip of his morning coffee and smiled. ‘But you should still go anyway.’

Teal almost dropped his mug. ‘Wait, what? Why?’

‘Because you’re too old a fox to have never seen different shores,’ he replied. ‘And because you’ve earned it. Stingy prize or not, this is an opportunity too good to pass up.’

‘But I’ve got work,’ Teal said.

‘You’ve been working there for years and you’ve never taken a sick day. He can give you the time.’

‘I’ve got studying to do.’

‘You can bring your notes with you.’

‘I... don’t want to leave you on your own.’

Teal’s father’s eyes widened. ‘Son, I appreciate the concern. But... I’ve been around for a good while now. You don’t think I can take care of myself?’ His father tapped his leg braces. ‘It’s not because of these, is it?’

Teal quickly shook his head. ‘No,’ he lied.

‘Good, because I go back and forth from work just fine five days a week. And the last thing I’d want in the world is to keep my son grounded for the rest of his life. Even if he’d say he didn’t mind it. Now...’

He got up from the breakfast table and paced ponderously over to the old cabinet in the hallway. There, he flicked down the long line of old brass handles, counting each drawer until he came to the thirteenth one. He drew out his keyring and rifled through them, one by one.

‘What kind of weird ceremony is this?’ Teal laughed from the table. He took a bite of his chicken toast and brushed off the crumbs. ‘It’s so serious, all of a sudden.’ He took a second bite and watched as his father unlocked the drawer, and slowly pulled the small compartment out. He hadn’t seen him so solemn in a long time.

When he eventually returned to the table, he was holding a small red envelope in his paws. He sliced cleanly through the seal with a single claw. Teal’s eyes widened as he realised what was going on. ‘No, no, no I can’t—’

But Emmett held a finger to his lips, and Teal fell silent. Inside the envelope was a wad of old banknotes. ‘You’re going to take this with you...’

‘Dad, I—’

‘You’re going to take this with you, and you’re going to have the time of your life in Sakurai. And you’re not going to think twice about it, or worry about me, or anyone else...’

His father’s voice broke briefly. His eyes glistened faintly in the light. ‘Your mother and I wanted to take you to so many places. And every time we talked about it, Sakurai was top of the list. Every time. This is exactly what she’d want. So that’s why you’re not going to argue with me, and you’re going to take it. Because this is a gift. It’s a gift from both of

us.'

'Dad...' Teal got up and put his arms around his shoulders. His chin rested gently on his father's head. 'I don't know what to say.'

'You don't have to say anything. Just go. And don't look back.'

Teal gulped. 'Okay,' he said. It was as much for his own sake as his father's. 'Can I get you a tissue now?'

Emmett sniffed. He was smiling. 'A wrench will do just fine, thanks,' he said. 'I appear to have sprung a leak.'

Teal laughed. 'Don't be embarrassed, it happens to everyone. I'm still just as proud to have you as a dad.'

'Proud? Do you have any idea how proud you make me?'

'Yes,' Teal sighed.

'No,' his father said. 'You don't. Because if you did, every day, your heart would burst.' Teal smiled sheepishly. 'Just look at how you've grown. The first fox in the family to go to university; you're breaking a new record every day. When the time comes, you're going to make one lucky vixen very happy. She'd be so proud.' Teal bit his tongue and nodded.

Emmett dabbed at his eyes. 'Now I'd better plug up this leak before the whole kitchen's swimming,' he laughed. 'You should get ready for work. I'm sure your colleagues won't believe it when they hear about it.'

'Sure,' Teal said. 'I might even find someone that agrees with me,' he added in his head.

O-Bun Sesame

'Congrats, you should totally go!'

'Do us proud, sport!'

'A history buff going to Sakurai? Why is this even a question?'

Teal flexed his paw and sighed. Drat. At least his fingers were doing better than yesterday. After blasting them under the cold tap, he dried them off and wound two blue plasters tightly around the cuts. He looked to Nidah hopefully, the last of his workmates who had yet to speak.

‘So your issue is that the prize is a glorified plane ticket, and that going to Sakurai would be a financially irresponsible move that also conflicts with your busy schedule?’ she asked him. He nodded. Her eyes narrowed. ‘I don’t see the problem here.’

‘Forget it,’ he shrugged.

‘I’m serious.’

‘Excuse me?’ a yellow warbler whispered at Nidah’s till, raising a wing. She could barely see over the counter. Nidah didn’t seem to notice her.

‘Right now, you’re enjoying the most freedom with the least financial responsibility you’re ever going to get,’ she told Teal. ‘According to you, Opus City University already has you in its jaws, so what difference does it make? Why not live a little? You might decide you like it.’

‘Like what?’ Mr Jeffries called, shutting the door behind him. He looked uncharacteristically cheerful as he marched into the kitchen with a large box of condiment packets. His wings were securely banded behind him. ‘Apologies for being so chirpy – someone managed to barter an additional fifty pounds off our supply of branded sauces. Not bad going for a flying fox of my age, eh? But please, hold your applause. I must know what everyone is so excited about.’

‘Hello?’ the warbler whispered, standing on the tips of her claws and waving a wing around.

‘Teal’s going to Sakurai next week,’ Nidah said.

‘What?’

The box hit the floor with a sickening squelch. Ketchup started bleeding out from the broken cardboard flaps. Even the customer at the counter was stunned into silence. Teal quickly grabbed the dishcloth and bent down to clean it up. Any chance of getting that time off was oozing away like sauce down the grooves of the tiles.

‘It’s nothing, sir,’ he said. Mr Jeffries winced apologetically back.

‘It’s hardly nothing,’ Dinah beamed. ‘Nothing is the boring in-between stuff that nobody talks about, like when you have to make yourself sneeze, or that time you decided to try a different conditioner, but had to go to the emergency room when all your fur started falling out. This is the real deal! Teal totally won a free holiday!’

‘That I still might not be going on,’ he added hastily.

‘Well that’s a blessed relief for my ears.’ Mr Jeffries got a tissue out and touched up his forehead with it. ‘Because I probably couldn’t let you go anyway.’

Everybody stopped what they were doing and stared straight at him. ‘What?’ It resounded through the walls.

A long, painfully awkward silence followed. The only sound was the crinkling of plastic packets as Teal inspected them one by one, wiping down the good ones and disposing of the rest that were still bleeding sauce everywhere. His head was bent down low. He wanted nothing more than to avoid confrontation at all costs.

At the front, the warbler with the quiet voice seemed to have given up talking entirely. Both of her wings were up in the air, waving two white napkins like she was holding semaphore flags.

The phone jolted everyone where they stood when it buzzed suddenly in its cradle. Jules tossed it up in the air and

caught it, all too happy to have something to attend to. He had his fingers around the coils before it could ring out a second time.

Mr Jeffries seemed confused as to why everybody was still staring at him. Even Dinah and Nidah had their backs to the front counter. ‘Opus City is hosting its Out and Out Parade next week,’ he said. ‘You couldn’t cross the street with a paddle. We all have to make it through together. Besides, the regulations say I need two months’ notice.’ He leaned over the box and pretended to help Teal with the packets.

Nidah glared at him. ‘You wrote those regulations.’

He shrugged. ‘Somebody had to.’ He prodded at a sauce packet, only to recoil in horror as it smeared his claws bright red. Behind him, the thumbs of his wings clacked, straining furiously against the bands that bound them together. He patted the box encouragingly, leaving streaky stains down the cardboard, and got up to wash his claws.

Jules looked up from the phone. ‘Come on, boss,’ he said, covering the receiver. ‘He was the only one that stayed after hours yesterday, and that ain’t for the first time neither. How long were you cleanin’ house for, sport?’

Teal mumbled something to himself.

‘Teal?’

‘Two and a half hours,’ he said.

‘Well there we have it. And you ain’t askin’ for paid leave, are ya?’

Teal shook his head.

‘We’ve all given you those two days and more, boss. Ain’t this just callin’ it quits?’

Mr Jeffries sighed. He stepped over the box, where Teal was still busy sorting the sauce packets that he’d dropped onto the floor, and positioned himself in the centre of the kitchen.

All eyes were on him.

‘There’s a story I was told when I was a pup. It’s about a village that tries to reach the sacred garden high in the clouds, where the nectar from the trees grants you the wings of the gods. Every time the villagers built a ladder, the gods laughed and sent the rains, and the ladder sunk into the ground. Then the villagers piled up stones, and when the rains came, the same thing happened. Everything disappeared into the dirt.

‘Eventually, one young villager has a bright idea. They should make a whole mountain out of it. And so for the whole day, they all work together to help build it up. Sick or healthy, warrior or elder, everybody adds to the pile of dirt. When the gods look down on what they’ve done, they laugh and send the rains as usual. Almost all of it is washed away, but a small mound remains, strong and packed together. The gods have made something even they cannot wash away. This is how the mountain starts.

‘Every day, the village brings as much as it can to build it up. Even the pups travel up the pile to add to it, holding the dirt with their tiny claws. When they stamp it down together at the end of the long day, it’s barely higher than before. But it’s stronger, and it weathers the rains just a little better. If anybody in the village forgets to do their share, the work of the day is lost. But if everyone adds to it, then even at the end of the harshest rains, it still stands a little taller than before. And then a little taller. And then a little taller.’

‘I hope you’re not implying what I think you’re implying.’ Melanie’s arms were folded. The markings above her eyes always made her look irate, but today, they seemed especially pronounced. ‘Don’t give us that “we’re all in it together” speech. You took a day off just last week.’

‘To see my pups,’ he said. His wings drooped. ‘I don’t get

to see them often. I never miss a chance. Not one.'

'No, more power to you,' Melanie said. 'It's almost like there are good reasons why someone might need time off.'

Nidah tore off her cap and flicked the badge clean off her uniform. 'Teal gets your permission, or I'm walking right now, and you can build this dirt mountain by yourself. How about that?' She put a paw on Teal's shoulder.

'Nidah, no...' he whispered. But she just smiled.

'It's no mane off my back. You know I'm only here for Dinah anyway.' She turned to Mr Jeffries. 'So what's it going to be, sir? Because he's never taken a day off, and he's so determined to avoid an argument, he hasn't spoken up for himself once. It's two days out of the whole year. We're not the ones being unreasonable here.'

Mr Jeffries took a napkin from his pocket and wiped his forehead. 'You only need the one weekend, correct?'

Teal nodded. The sauce packets had been taken care of, so he crushed the empty box into the bin and went to rinse himself off. Without anything to keep his paws busy, he ducked his head down low and turned up the water. The warbler at the front started whispering again, but everybody was still fixated on Mr Jeffries, whose wings were anxiously jostling against each other.

The flying fox hid his face behind the napkin during the deliberation. The tap hissed in the background. 'I guess two days wouldn't kill me,' he breathed finally.

Teal turned the tap off, shocked. He hadn't asked for the time off, and he still didn't even know if he was going, but the relief was immense all the same. Coming from Mr Jeffries, this meant a lot. He could have punched the air. 'Thank you, sir,' he said. 'I really, really appreciate it.'

'It's no trouble. But in return, could you stay behind for a

few hours tonight? I swear, I'm just one check short of getting the cleaning crew to turn around. One more phone call.'

'But...'

Teal started. His Sunday shift always ended at midday to make room for his studies, and any other errands he had to carry out. But even as reasons started bubbling up in his head, he quickly trailed off.

'One kind turn for another?' Mr Jeffries said hopefully. Teal couldn't exactly say no.

'I can help you lock up at five,' he nodded. Mr Jeffries looked delighted. Everybody seemed to heave a collective sigh of relief.

'Can someone help, please?' At the front, the warbler's voice had started rasping from the strain, though it still barely rose above a whisper. Nidah whirled around.

'Damn it, what do you want?'

She shrunk back below the counter. 'I, uh, ordered a diet Mr Paprika. But this is the regular one.'

Nidah leaned in close. 'Are you diabetic?'

'Yes.'

Her mouth fell open for a moment. Then, she kicked into gear. 'In that case,' she said, disposing of the cup and filling a new one under the drinks fountain in one fluid motion, 'please accept our humblest apologies, and a complimentary beverage size increase. Here at O-Bun Sesame, we strive to provide the best service and ensure you always leave with your heart's desire. If you need anything else, just say the magic words, and we'll do whatever we can to help. Remember, it's as easy as O-Bun Sesame. You have a magical day now! Enjoy your drink.'

'Thanks. You too,' she squeaked, smiling for a few seconds before realising her mistake. Turning pink, she hid her head under a wing and hurriedly shuffled away.

‘That was so cute,’ Dinah sighed, her cheeks resting on her paws. ‘I really hope she wasn’t a scrounger.’

Nidah shook her head. ‘I saw the pump,’ she said, patting her hip.

‘Good,’ Dinah smiled. ‘It’d be terrible if she wasn’t suffering from diabetes.’

‘I’m sure she’d agree,’ Nidah said drily, straightening up as a Muntjac buck strolled up to the counter, surreptitiously adjusting the sizeable antler cosy atop his head. ‘Hello sir, welcome to O-Bun Sesame...’

* * *

Most of the Sunday shift went by without any fuss. Teal didn’t have any complaints. Aside from a small nagging doubt that he was forgetting something, it was a welcome distraction. He loved being able to knuckle down and work hard for a few hours, safely hidden in the kitchen from prying eyes and pointing fingers.

For a while, it seemed as though the day was going to be incident free. He almost made it too.

One of the shoppers had been hogging the counter for the best part of an hour, and they still were yet to buy anything. Mr Jeffries had his eye on the doe as he paced back and forth.

‘Say what you want about the rain,’ she told Nidah, holding her phone up to the light to snap a quick picture, ‘but this time of year is still as dry as hell. The cutest guys go around looking like tree stumps, and the rest of them were already shacked up by Christmas. What’s a doe gotta do to get a look-in, you know? I mean, he’s cute.’

She pointed her phone at Teal. He tried to turn away, keeping his paws busy by adding new fries to the rack. When the flash went off, he just wanted to disappear. ‘Shame about the...’ She gestured around her own face. ‘Well, you know.’

Nidah stared at her. ‘No, I don’t. Enlighten me.’

‘Girl, you know.’

‘I really don’t,’ Nidah said through a gritted smile. ‘Can I interest you in our new Blueberry Blast?’

‘Not if that’s what he had,’ the doe snorted.

Nidah slowly leaned forwards. ‘This job means practically nothing to me. You know that, right? So you know I’m telling the truth when I say that I’m not above slapping that phone out of your hand, and sending you on your way.’

She just stared at her.

‘There are animals born more hues than you can imagine that are perfectly happy in the world. Mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, animals that are married, single, working hard or retired, and I’m sure they’d appreciate nothing more than if ignoramuses like yourself stopped judging them based on how much they looked like you, and started judging them based on the quality of their character. Although perhaps that’s not what you want, after all. I very much doubt that’s a world you’d be thriving in.’

The doe slowly backed away from the counter. Within a few seconds, she was in the middle of a busy crowd, and after one final phone flash, she was gone.

‘I saw that, Miss Stivers!’ Mr Jeffries called from the kitchen.

Nidah looked back at him. Even she seemed uncertain about what was going to happen next. One paw was already on her cap, poised to remove it for the final time.

‘Nice work. I would’ve gone harder.’

Her paw fell to her side. She almost smiled. ‘Noted, sir. I wouldn’t have thought it.’

‘Bah,’ he dismissed proudly, his claws slung through the belt on his hips. ‘You Brits. Where I’m from, you would be

tied up and thrown in the sea for less. Pups with rare colours are like sages. You come to them for blessings and advice. You do not speak badly of a sage,' he uttered. He was still wagging a claw warningly as he left to go and distract Jules for a while.

'Thanks for sticking up for me,' Teal flushed.

'Don't mention it,' she said. 'One of my grandparents was born a little darker than the rest of the family. Less than two shades, which you'd barely notice unless you were a maned wolf yourself. You wouldn't believe all the bleaching and medical testing she had to go through. She grew up when they were still called "off-colours". Some of her best friends are still living with the chemical burns.'

'And not much has changed,' Melanie chimed in. She paused on her way over to the counter with a monumental stack of fries, burgers and sandwiches that reached almost over her head. 'We still call it malchromatism in the field, even though medically, there's zilch wrong with it.'

'Exactly,' Nidah nodded. The boxes started swaying, so she ushered her over to Dinah's till to unload it all. She kept a sharp eye on her as Melanie slowly deconstructed her fast-food tower, one delicious, greasy brick at a time. 'Society is hierarchical,' Nidah continued, 'and we've been tribal for millennia. That doesn't make it any less wrong. We've got to do whatever we can to help. Even if it's just the little stuff.'

'You still didn't have to do that,' he said. 'Or stick up for me earlier.'

'Well you know me. Any excuse to stick it to authority,' she grinned. 'But if you're that thankful, you can always take us with you. If you have any spare spaces going...'

'Sorry. The prize only gives you one ticket.'

'Really? One ticket for a week-long holiday in Sakurai?'

He nodded.

‘That’s a little stingy,’ she sniffed. ‘But alas, not surprising for Opus City University. You can go ahead and smuggle us in your luggage then. Just not your carry-on...’

It was said so straight-faced, it took him a second to realise she was joking. He laughed.

‘What, you think you can’t?’

‘I mean...’

‘Alright, alright, not me at least. But Dinah could literally fit in your suitcase if you wanted her to. We’ve done it before on a few trips. It saves us a small fortune.’

‘We coached it to the seaside just last week,’ Dinah smiled. Then, her face fell. ‘But Nidah won’t let me do it when we go flying. Not even once. She’s a spoilsport.’

‘I told you, you’d freeze to death up there. They don’t heat up the baggage hold like they do the rest of the plane.’

‘I’ve got good circulation,’ Dinah pouted. ‘If it’s that cold, just pack me a hot water bottle and I’ll be good to go.’

‘Don’t tempt me,’ Nidah grinned, rolling her eyes. ‘But if you need advice, Teal, we’ve both been to Sakurai.’

He was thrilled to hear it. ‘You have?’

‘Sure. Dinah’s got family; we’ve been a few times. Whereabouts are you going, exactly?’

‘Takai, but the plane touches down in Nahashi.’

‘Well you’re in luck, because if I remember correctly, you’re just in time for cherry blossom season. Nahashi should be—’

‘In full bloom,’ Dinah blushed. ‘You’re going to love it, I promise. The cherry blossom trees make so many animals so happy, even though they come and go before you know it.’ She looked at Nidah and sighed. ‘For years and years and years, I thought they were the most beautiful things in the

whole world. But that was before I met—’

‘Me...?’ It was Nidah’s turn to blush, although she was quick to clear her throat and try to move on. ‘Anyway, you’ll have no shortage of things to do in Takai. There are art centres, museums... Dinah, what was that tower called?’

‘The Soraki Tower.’

‘Yes, the Soraki Tower. Now there’s a view that a thousand lobotomies couldn’t make you forget.’

‘I’ll bet,’ Teal grinned. The reality of the prize was only just starting to hit him. To be able to reach out and touch the boughs of a cherry blossom tree would be unreal. He could already see himself raising his nose to smell the delicate floral bouquet, the flower heads bobbing softly in the slightest hint of breeze as falling petals twinkled around him like raindrops suspended in the air...

Nidah nudged him in the ribs. ‘Hey!’

‘Looks like you won’t have to wait much longer.’ She pointed to the clock. Both hands were dead on twelve. His Sunday shift had never gone by so quickly. Maybe a trip to Sakurai wasn’t the worst idea in the world.

He ripped his face mask off and started undoing the tail straps, one at a time. It took considerable restraint not to thrash it around in relief when it was finally free.

‘Hey, Melanie?’

She was busy packaging a batch of freshly seasoned chilli sesame fries. ‘What?’

He grinned. ‘I don’t know about you, but I don’t remember collapsing at work today. I guess that means no free lunch for you.’ He grabbed a takeaway bag and pinched the carton straight out of her hands. ‘Better luck next time!’

‘Damn you, Blue!’

He was cackling all the way to the door. ‘I’m off!’ he

called, grabbing his coat and bag.

Mr Jeffries reeled back. ‘Mr Arke, don’t forget—’

‘To help you lock up later? I’ll be there, Mr Jeffries!’

‘I still don’t know what could be more enjoyable than spending the afternoon with us,’ he said. Had he known whether he had been joking, Teal probably would have laughed. ‘But you have fun out there, Mr Arke.’

‘I will, sir,’ he smiled. He slipped a paw into his coat pocket, where it brushed up against the resignation form. Fun wasn’t exactly the right word. ‘One thing at a time, T,’ he sighed, letting himself out through the back door.

Edging past piled-up binbags and huddles of disgruntled, chain-smoking fast-food restaurant workers, he found himself on the busy Opus City streets once more.

University could wait. He had someone important to see.

Mum

‘Hey. Sorry, I know it’s been a while. It’s just... things have been hard lately. I brought you these.’

He knelt down and placed the bouquet on the grass. ‘It’s your favourite. White chrysanthemums.’ He took a deep breath and stepped back. ‘Happy Birthday.’

The price tag was still stuck to the plastic wrap, having refused to come off even with plenty of coaxing with his claws, but he was sure she wouldn’t have minded. All it would show is that he’d put the rest of the month’s train money towards her present. And that was surely something she’d appreciate. Right?

The truth was that Teal didn’t know.

If she could talk, what would she have said to him? Would she have chided him for being silly, all the while secretly appreciating the gesture, or would she have been concerned,

worried or angry at how irresponsible it was? He didn't know, but he liked to think it would have been the former. That was how he remembered her.

But he never knew which of his memories were real, and which ones had been dreamed up in flights of fancy during his childhood. He still remembered, all too clearly, the time he'd been convinced that his mother was a bird. His father explained that she had grown wings and flown away, and after that, he couldn't have imagined her any other way. It was only after he'd asked his father why he hadn't been born a bird too that he became aware of how naïve he was being.

Teal had never been redder. That day, he may well have been confused for any other fox.

'I hope you're doing well. I don't know if that's a good way of putting it, all things considered, but you know what I mean. No matter where you are, I hope you're okay. And happy. Dad misses you a lot, but that goes without saying. I miss you too. That also goes without saying. I...'

He hesitated. Leaves rustled in the breeze around him. The sun was peeking out through the clouds. 'I was wondering if I could ask you something. I'm not superstitious. I don't know if you can hear me. But if there's the tiniest chance that you can, why not take it? There's no harm in trying, right?'

He crouched down. For some reason, it felt right to lower his voice. It seemed more private, even if he was already alone in the churchyard. 'Dad wants me to go to Sakurai. Seems like everybody does. He's even trying to give me the money that you two saved up. But I can't. My life's a mess right now, and when I go to campus, I'm probably going to screw it up forever. I can't just run away and pretend it'll all be fine.

'And you know what Dad's like. You were the crazy, self-

sufficient one that went around the world, painting murals and busking and doing all that stuff. He's just sort of... stayed put. Don't get me wrong, he's the best dad I could've asked for, and I know he can take care of himself. But will he, when I'm gone? Part of me thinks the reason he tries so hard is because I'm around. I don't know. You don't want me to go, do you?' Everything went quiet. Teal looked around. 'Do you?'

There was only silence.

'Give me a sign if you want me to go.'

Teal felt something brush against his cheek. He yelped and jumped back, only to see that it was a small sycamore seed spiralling its way down. It landed delicately on the grass by his hind paws. He shivered and shook his head. 'Anyway, as I was saying. If you want me to go, give me a sign.'

The wind picked up, whistling through the trees nearby. One of the branches snapped and flopped its way down the overgrowth.

'Just a sign. Any old sign will do.'

A car horn bellowed in the distance.

Teal sighed. 'Darn it, you're the worst,' he said. 'I guess that means I'm going to Sakurai. Happy now?'

Another sycamore seed came down, helicoptering through the air in front of him. It landed in the palm of his paw. He traced the outline of the seed with a finger, circling each side of the intricate, almost vein-like membrane through which the light seemed to glow.

They looked just like a set of wings.

Streets

'That's a cute monitor,' Teal said. 'May I?' The vixen holding the leash nodded. He bent down to pet it. The monitor lizard closed its eyes and flicked its tongue out. 'Darn, doesn't

it just make you wonder where we all went wrong?’

‘They’re up in the clouds and living the fantasy,’ she shrugged, rifling through the tennis balls and disposable bags in her hip pouch. ‘The rest of us are stuck here on Terra Fauna with bills, knives and garbage bags.’

Teal nodded, running his paw along the scales of the monitor’s back. As he came to its neck, it bobbed its head up to meet his fingers. Not for the first time, he wondered whether the Great Homogenisation had been such a good thing.

Scientists still weren’t sure why so many species started evolving similar traits around the same time. Theories ranged all the way from climate change and comets depositing valuable minerals to the most outlandish alien conspiracy theories, but Teal wasn’t as much concerned with the reason as the result.

After all that evolution, only a blink in the eye of the cosmos, this was where everybody had ended up. He was swimming in debt, he hadn’t slept in twenty-four hours and he hadn’t gone out with his friends in months.

‘Bills, knives and garbage bags,’ he repeated after her, shaking his head.

He’d rather have been the lizard.

Opus City University

Opus City University was a place out of time. A collection of tall brick towers, weathered statues and a huge green courtyard, it looked like it had been airlifted straight from the early nineteenth century. It didn’t appear to have weathered the landing well either.

Long before Teal made it to the entrance, he could see the famous clock tower peeking over the tops of newer, sleeker

buildings made of glass. It may not have been the biggest clock tower in the country, but it was certainly the loudest. As a result, Opus City University was a place you'd hear long before you ever saw it.

He had hoped to find the campus a little quieter on a Sunday, but stepping underneath the university's engraved stone logo and coat of arms, he found himself far from alone.

From a single glance, he knew exactly where he could walk, and which parts of the courtyard to avoid. Already, he was drawing attention from students that hadn't taken his arrival well back in September. He didn't know whether they thought he was only there to fill some sort of quota, or if they secretly suspected him of dying his fur for attention. Nobody said anything, but at university, you didn't need to. The silent stares said more than words ever could.

When he saw the Forum Bell, his paw shot straight to his pocket. The form was still there. He sighed. It was a long walk. 'Just do it before anyone can stop you,' he muttered through a gritted smile.

The Forum Bell sat in the centre of the courtyard behind a giant set of stone steps. It glowed in the sun like an enormous stained-glass bell jar, complete with the viewing tower handle at the top. Inside was the university library, which was permanently packed, the reception, which was always unmanned, and the student centre, which was exactly what Teal was looking for. He'd read up on all the forms that needed to be filled in, and all the departments that had to be notified. All the necessary steps had been taken.

Leaving university was as simple as walking up to the student centre and dropping the form in the mail slot. Now, he just had to do it.

He marched towards the Forum Bell with purpose, his bag

slung over his shoulder. But after only a few steps, he noticed that the track team had just circled past it, running laps on the field around the courtyard. One of them broke from the group and made a bee line straight for him. It didn't take him long to figure out who it was; the ears were a dead giveaway. He let go of the form in his pocket, raising a paw to wave back.

'Hey T!'

'Hey.'

Finn bounded up to him. Today, he was wearing a wolf's head hat. Its big, dumb eyes were staring outward in different directions, the foam teeth clinging around his face.

'That's a bit morbid. What do the other wolves on the track team think of that?'

Finn beamed. 'They're the ones that bought it for me in the first place,' he said, wiggling his ears from within the material. 'A fox in wolf's clothing. What do you think?'

'That you've got too many hats.'

Finn stuck his tongue out. 'You can never have too many hats. Speaking of which, I was going to ask if you wanted one too, but you never sent me your number back. You still got cold feet about talking on the phone? I can learn semaphore if that's easier.'

Teal's paw went straight to his forehead. What an idiot. He knew he'd forgotten something. 'Finn, I'm so sorry. I lost your number yesterday. The craziest thing happened. There was this homeless guy, and he was bleeding everywhere, so I had to give him something for his nose...'

'Relax, I believe you,' Finn grimaced. 'How about you chuck me your phone, and I just add it myself? If you're still cool with it, of course...'

Teal nodded, handing Finn his old Cherry Logic 4. Finn whistled. 'Wow. Are you sure you don't want me to start a

fire and get a blanket while we're at it?' Teal closed the hat over Finn's face. 'I'm joking, I'm joking,' the muffled voice laughed from within. 'Smoke signals would be much faster.'

After a few rapid taps, Finn tossed the phone back to him. 'Done. Now there's something much more important to be talking about.'

Anxiety rose from the pit of Teal's stomach. What else had he forgotten about? 'Oh god, what is it?'

'The competition, stupid!' Finn laughed.

'Congratulations!'

'Oh, that.' Teal could feel his cheeks burning. 'Thank you. But that's basically your prize. I don't mind if you want to go instead...'

'Are you kidding?' Finn nearly bowled him over. 'You won it fair and square. I just want you to have the time of your goddamn life! And if you can take family and friends with you, I wouldn't say no...'

Teal's stomach dropped. 'I really wish I could. But you only get one ticket.'

'Really? For a whole week aboard? Are you sure?'

'I read the fine print so many times, I could still see my laptop screen hours later when I blinked. Trust me. I'm sure.'

'Huh. Well that's a bit stingy.'

At this point, the track team had made their way around the entire campus perimeter, and were circling back round to the entrance. Finn nodded at each of them as they ran by. Some of the runners held their paws up to Teal, and he even got a few sarcastic salutes.

'Congrats, T!'

'Have a great time, T!'

'Don't bring back anything you didn't take with you!'

'Hey!'

‘They’re just messing around!’ Finn laughed. ‘But the whole society’s happy for you. No hard feelings there.’

‘So you really think I should go?’ he asked.

‘Definitely!’

Teal sighed. ‘Why does everyone keep saying that?’

‘I dunno,’ Finn said, tapping Teal’s nose. ‘Maybe because folks like to see a good friend catch a break every now and then. That, or they’re just nuts.’

‘I’ll go with option two.’

‘Come on, it’ll be fun!’

Teal sighed again. ‘But...’

Finn smirked. ‘But what?’ Teal nibbled on his knuckles and tried to think. ‘Ha! You’ve been saying “but” all day, and you’ve finally ran out of reasons not to go!’

‘I have not!’

‘Yeah, I think I know you better than that.’ Finn grinned. ‘Just go for it. Really think for a second – what’s the worst that could happen?’

‘I guess you’re right,’ Teal said begrudgingly.

Finn smiled back. ‘I’m always right. You’ve got a lot to learn, bucko.’

‘Can I at least try the hat on?’

Finn jumped backwards. ‘Not a chance.’

‘Not even if I catch you?’

Finn’s eyes narrowed. ‘You know I can run faster than you, right?’

‘Not without a head start.’

Finn sprinted off down the grass. ‘You just watch me!’

Finn had almost every advantage possible, but even then, it didn’t take long for Teal to catch up and claim his prize. His ears were trapped inside a giant foam hat, after all; it was only a matter of time before they overheated. By the time he

handed it over to Teal, it was practically dripping. ‘Still want to wear it?’ he smirked.

Teal plopped it on and shuddered. ‘Wow, I feel like such a winner.’

‘I’m pretty sure that’s just the sweat running down your face. Where are you headed, by the way? You looked like you were going to the Forum Bell.’

‘I was.’

He stretched out and tapped a hind paw on one of the giant stone steps. ‘Well we’re here. What’s on the menu today?’

Teal stared at the giant stone staircase before them. The butterflies that usually fluttered in Teal’s stomach when he spoke to Finn were starting to turn into bees. ‘I... uh... don’t know if I can tell you.’ Finn’s carefree grin vanished in an instant. That was the last thing Teal wanted. ‘Can we keep walking?’ he asked. ‘We can talk on the way.’

‘Sure,’ Finn shrugged. He kept a close eye on Teal as they ascended the staircase, one enormous step at a time.

Teal just wanted to get to the student centre as quickly as possible. He couldn’t remember ever being so happy to see the revolving doors of the Forum Bell entrance as they tramped up the final stone step. But when they got closer, and he started to recognise the animals congregating around them, he quickly changed his mind.

‘Maybe we should use the entrance around the back,’ he said, backing away. But Finn just stood there, confused.

‘What’s wrong, T? It’s just the rowing team.’

‘I know,’ he muttered. He’d seen them only yesterday, though he didn’t know whether any of them had seen him. If there was one group of animals he hadn’t wanted to bump into, it was them.

‘Look, they’re even waving! I guess they’re happy to see

you.'

Sure enough, one of them came running up, a pine marten that was soaking wet. Teal wrenched his eyes away from the familiar logo on his jacket and put on his best smile. He hoped it was just water.

'Teal!' he yelled, clapping him hard on the back.

'Oof! Duna!' Teal gasped. They'd been friends ever since they met each other on campus at the start of university. Were it not for the events of the previous day, it would have been a relief to see him again. 'Long time no see. Right...?' Teal stared at him intently, but Duna only looked confused.

'Sure,' he shrugged. Teal let out the breath he'd been holding in. The knot in the pit of his stomach slowly started unravelling. He wasn't going to need to run for his life after all. 'But what rock have you been hiding under? It's been weeks! We need to get you online for a few rounds of 5K5, stat! Nice hat by the way.'

'Five what?' Teal asked. Duna looked embarrassed for him.

'Krayzee Kangaroo Karter's Karting Kingdom 5. It only came out a few months ago. Where've you been, hibernating?'

'I wish.'

'I'll bet you haven't heard of Slay Belles either, then?'

'Slay Belles?'

He howled with laughter long after it ceased to be appropriate; Finn eventually had to tell him to stop and take a break. 'Teal, I love you, but you've gotta go outside sometime!'

Finn waved him off, but once he was gone, even he looked to Teal with surprise. 'You seriously haven't heard of Slay Belles? Fourteen bucks compete for a hundred thousand dollars, shedding their antlers to see who can be the real belle

of the ball?’

Teal shrugged.

‘Well it’s a very popular television show. Even my grandparents watch it, and you know how they feel about the gays.’ Finn rolled his eyes.

‘Tell me about it. My dad still doesn’t know.’

‘Teal, that’s crazy. Your dad’s not one of the bad ones. What do you think he’s going to do? Chuck you out after eighteen years?’

Teal shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Maybe. I love him to bits, but just because he’s not religious doesn’t mean he can’t still flip out. It was a different time back then. Plus, his family were all hardcore types, so who knows? I’d rather not find out.’

‘Me neither. But you can’t hide it forever.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ Teal muttered. He stepped up to the revolving doors of the Forum Bell, walking straight through the crowd of chattering rowers, and pressed a paw against the glass.

‘Hey, it’s flower boy!’

Teal shuddered. He’d know that voice anywhere. It was the captain of the rowing team, the same buck that had raised a fist to the homeless pudú only the day before. He used to go to school with him, but there was no love lost between them when they parted ways. After yesterday, he had no intention of talking to him again. The rowers started making their way over to the stone steps. His paw was already on the door.

All he had to do was push...

‘Fallen into any more bushes lately?’

‘Don’t take the bait,’ Finn whispered. He put his paw beside Teal’s and gently pushed forwards. The door began to move.

‘Hey, I was only joking. Don’t be so blue about it.’ With that, the captain stomped off to join the others.

Teal stopped dead. The revolving door behind him thudded against his heel and creaked to a halt. He didn’t have many memories of his mother, but of the few he could still recall, one of them was crystal clear. It went against everything his father had ever told him about being different.

The first few days of school hadn’t been kind.

‘Some of your schoolmates are going to treat you differently from the others. And it’s not always because they’re scared, or because they haven’t been taught better. Sometimes, they just think they’re better than you. They see that you don’t blend in, and they think it’s because you can’t. And because they try so hard to fit in with everybody else, they’ll see you as a threat. Because if you’re different, and you can still be happy, then maybe they can too. And that means admitting that they’ve been wrong. That the only animal that’s been making them unhappy is themselves.

‘So they think they’re better than you. So what? You’re a clever fox, and you can run rings around any of them. Prove them wrong.’

The words from the past were still ringing in Teal’s ears as he marched up to the rowing team. They were all milling around in singlets at the top of the giant staircase. The captain himself was sitting with an arm draped around one of his teammates, a well-groomed otter, and the only one that came close to being as tall as him. As they laughed together, one bandaged hoof played lazily with his fur.

‘Hey!’ he yelled at the buck. ‘Can I have a word?’ The rest of the team stopped talking abruptly, but the captain just looked amused. He rolled his shoulders, deliberating.

‘Yeah, alright,’ he rumbled eventually in his deep voice. It

took him a few seconds to get up, and when he finally rose to his full height, Teal couldn't help but wonder whether he'd already made the biggest mistake of the day. But it was too late to turn back now.

Buck gestured towards the fountain. Teal nodded. He removed the wolf hat carefully and handed it back to Finn, who was still having trouble picking his jaw up off the floor. 'This thing's a bad influence,' he said. 'You can have it back.'

'Teal, are you crazy?'

He tried to conceal the trembling of his chest with a laugh, but he doubted he was fooling anyone. What was he doing? He took a deep breath and shot him a grin. 'Let's find out.'

Bell Font

The Bell Font was the oldest feature of Opus City University, a relic from the time before non-vulpine students were permitted to attend. Even so, it was cracked and worn to within an inch of its life, crumbling slowly despite repeated attempts at restoration from some of the smartest minds in the country. Secretly, Teal thought that was probably for the best. In truth, it was a hideous old thing.

But it was also given a wide berth by students and professors alike, which made it the perfect place to talk.

Water sprayed out of each of the three stone tiers at its centre, and there was a cool, refreshing mist that emanated outwards. As Teal walked up to meet him, Buck swiped a hoof through the wash, watching the water drip down the elasticated bandages. 'Well?'

Teal paced warily around him and sat on the edge of the guard rail, holding his tail to stop it falling in. It was strangely serene. He didn't feel scared anymore. 'I'm sorry it's been such a tough time.'

‘S-sorry?’

‘You must go through a lot at this time of year. Bleeding randomly from your head can’t be easy, and you don’t get any warning either. Students prematurely shed more than any other group, just because of the stress. And we’ve all heard stories about what some folks do behind closed doors to get those things off in private. It’s brutal.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I get it.’ Buck looked confused. He scratched an antler self-consciously. ‘Thanks, I guess.’

‘That’s okay. Everyone knows that spring is tough on deer. But that’s not the only thing going on. It’s a tough time of year for a lot of species. Student debt got everyone down over Christmas, and this term, the work suddenly ramped up like something crazy. Maybe just think twice before trying to lay it on even harder.’

Buck blinked. ‘Are jokes illegal now?’

‘No, of course not.’ Teal paused, stroking his tail. ‘But knocking the teeth out of homeless strangers in alleyways?’ His eyes widened. ‘Yeah, that doesn’t sound nice to me either. And I think the uni might have a thing or two to say about it.’

Buck took a step towards him. White-hot rage burned in his eyes, but it was what Teal saw behind the anger that wracked him to his core, something that was perhaps even more dangerous. Fear. Real fear.

‘You wouldn’t dream of it,’ he grunted. Every muscle in his huge body seemed impossibly taut. One knuckle cracked on a hoof that was as large as Teal’s head.

It took all the self-control in the world for Teal not to make a break for it there and then. Instead, ignoring every instinct blaring in his head, he stayed rooted to the spot, stroking his tail nonchalantly and listening to the tinkling of the fountain. He knew that if there was any hope of getting out of this, he

had to stay in complete control of himself. There could be no reaction at all. Not one ear flick.

If it escalated to anything beyond a conversation, he had already lost. And frankly, he valued his limbs too much.

‘I won’t even be part of this university tomorrow,’ he said calmly. It wasn’t a bluff either. If he wasn’t so terrified, he might have even smiled. ‘So who knows what I’m dreaming about? You all saw the camera flash go off.’

The buck rubbed his head and looked around. His anger seemed to have disappeared. What was left was the fear. He didn’t know where to turn to.

Over by the Forum Bell, his teammates were staring inquisitively, their ears perked and twitching in vain. The well-groomed otter was by far the most nervous of the bunch. Buck seemed to look to him for an answer, but he just gave a well-meaning shrug. He turned back to Teal. ‘Look, what do you want from me? M-money, is that it? We went to primary school together, Teal. You know I don’t have money.’

‘No, no, no.’ Teal closed his eyes and shook his head firmly. The buck seemed genuinely scared, but just a moment ago, he had been more than ready to crush his head like a watermelon. Teal kept him waiting, trusting that he wouldn’t open his eyes to find himself disembowelled in the gutter of the fountain. After a few moments, he cracked an eye open. He’d guessed correctly. Excellent.

‘I just want you to try a little sympathy. That’s all. Life’s tough enough as it is. It doesn’t need anyone making it tougher. That includes beating up random animals in alleyways, by the way.’

He scowled. ‘Do you even know what that homeless guy was saying?’

‘No...’

‘Then why are you poking your nose in?’

Teal glanced towards the otter. His head quickly disappeared back around the corner. ‘Because I can guess.’

Buck’s ears fell. What little residual anger he had was gone now. He stared down at the ground. His expression was unplaceable. ‘You can’t tell anyone.’

‘I wouldn’t.’

‘Not that anyone would believe you anyway. It’s just guys messing around. Happens all the time. Nothing to be ashamed of, because it’s not... and I’m not even like that. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, but I’m not. Not ever. I mean, look at me.’ He thumped a clenched hoof against his chest.

‘I see you,’ Teal said quietly. They met eyes. The hoof slid slowly down, before falling to his side once more. ‘And I’m sorry for what that pudú said. But whatever it was, I don’t think it was worth getting his face busted in. And based on your reaction, I think you agree.’

‘Look, I’m...’ Buck took a deep breath. He tried hooking his thumbs through his singlet several times before giving up. ‘I’m sorry. It’s been tough. Things always get a bit red around shedding season.’

‘Yeah, well I’ve been blue all my life, and that hasn’t been easy either, because it never stops.’ Buck seemed taken aback by the sudden outburst. ‘I’ve been stared at from across the street and followed home; I’ve had random strangers tell me I’m cursed, and make offers to buy my pelt from my family when I’m dead. During Fresher’s Week, a load of guys from the drinking society held me down and tried to shave me on the campus steps. And you were right there with them.’

Buck looked away.

‘So I get it, it’s hard. I don’t know everything that you’ve been through. You could’ve gone to hell and back, and

nobody would even know.’ Buck just stared at him. After a few seconds, he slowly nodded. ‘But that doesn’t mean other folks haven’t been there too.’

‘I’ll give you something,’ he said. Teal held his breath. ‘I don’t know a lot of other scrawny dudes that I’d let talk to me like that. I guess it’s true what they say about foxes. You really can talk the talk.’

‘History student,’ Teal smirked. ‘I’m not getting a decent job out of this anyway, so I guess it’s my consolation prize.’

‘Huh?’

‘It’s like an award for runners-up. To console them.’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ he said, flexing his chest. ‘I’ve never been a runner-up.’

‘I’ll bet. I guess not a lot of folks are stupid enough to try and start anything with you.’

‘Not until today,’ he grunted. Teal’s paw froze in mid-stroke over his tail. ‘But I get it. I was a bonehead, and if I could take it back, I would. I really didn’t mean it. See for yourself.’ He held the bandaged hoof up. There was swelling all the way along it. ‘I know how to punch, and trust me, that wasn’t it. It was spur of the moment, I swear.’

‘I believe you.’

‘Then I’ve gotta ask something.’

‘What?’

It took a moment for him to speak. ‘Please delete those pictures. If OCU finds out what happened, my rowing career is done. And if anyone finds out about me and Cal—’

‘You and who?’

‘Cal. The otter.’

‘Ah.’ Teal nodded.

‘If that gets out, my life’s over. I’d be better off dead.’

‘Well your secret’s definitely safe with me.’ The buck

breathed a huge sigh of relief. From the looks of it, he'd been holding it in for a while. 'But I can't delete those pictures.'

'Teal, please...'

'No, I mean I literally can't delete those pictures. I never took any. It was just the flashlight app glitching out.'

Teal watched the full range of emotions flow through him. It started with confusion, which rose towards happiness as relief took over. The happiness then dissolved into irritation, which simmered slowly into anger, where it lingered for the longest time before turning finally, to Teal's immense relief, into amusement.

'Damn you!' Buck ran at full pelt towards him, moving swifter that Teal would have ever thought possible for a deer of his size. He was so terrified, he almost fell backwards into the fountain. But instead of being greeted by a flurry of fists, the buck leaned over and clapped him on the back. He was laughing out loud. 'You son of a gun, you damn near full nelsoned me with that one! Fair game, fair game. Hey, you don't do wrestling, do you?'

'No,' Teal wheezed. He couldn't feel his ribs. 'Why?'

'Shame,' he grinned. 'It'd be fun to knock you about for a few hours.'

'For you maybe,' Teal gulped. 'I think I'll stick to my history books.'

Well if you change your mind, you know where to find me and the rest of the guys.' He crossed his arms and smirked. 'Might take a few weeks, scratch that, months, but I think we could make a stag out of you.'

'T-thanks, I think,' Teal said. 'When I get tired of being a fox, I'll get in touch.'

He held his paw out. The buck crushed it effortlessly in his grip. Teal tried not to let it show through his cracked smile.

At that moment, the clock tower sounded off behind them. They both covered their ears, laughing at how ridiculous they looked as they listened to it bellow the time across the courtyard. When the thirteenth and final bong rang out, Buck smacked him on the back as one last gesture of good faith. Then, he jogged off to rejoin his team.

Before leaving the fountain, Teal surreptitiously leaned over and dipped his paw in the cool water. He felt like he'd been beaten to a pulp, and that was after being on the captain's good side. 'Bucks,' he muttered, nursing his twitching fingers under the water's surface. The handshake had taken both plasters clean off. 'What is it with bucks?'

'Hey, you're still alive!' Finn laughed when he stumbled back to the Forum Bell, cradling his aching paw behind him. 'Wasn't expecting that.'

'You're telling me,' Teal shuddered. He pressed a paw to the revolving door once more. But before walking through it, he turned back one last time. Back by the giant steps, Buck's teammates were all joking and gesticulating wildly around him. He appeared to be swept up in it all, but when he noticed Teal, he paused for a moment and nodded. Teal nodded back.

And then the door swung forwards, and they were in.

Forum Bell

'Yeah, I'm not going to ask what that was all about,' Finn said. 'I'm just glad you didn't get splattered all over the campus walls. It would've been a shame after being gone for so long.'

'Gone?'

'Where are we going?'

'The student centre.'

'Right.' Their footsteps echoed on the polished floor.

‘Well you haven’t been on campus for a while. Nobody knew where you were. There were rumours you were dropping out. Speaking of which...’

Teal’s eyes widened. He fumbled for a reply. ‘I couldn’t. I would never—’ But he couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence. Finn knew him too well. One look in his eyes, and it was as though all his thoughts had been laid bare.

‘Hey, if you think it’s the right choice, don’t let anyone stop you.’ Teal didn’t know what to say. That hadn’t been the response he was expecting. ‘Just don’t hole yourself up like you always do. You’ve got friends for a reason. You can talk to us. Right?’ Teal just nodded.

They walked through the Forum Bell together, gazing up at the glass constructions around them. Finn received a few strange looks for his choice of headwear, but he didn’t seem to mind, and Teal was just relieved that for once, he wasn’t the one being stared at. Aside from a few animals milling around, the place was empty. Teal appreciated the quiet.

‘I don’t know,’ he shrugged. ‘University isn’t what I thought it was going to be. Even when I was a kid, I knew I’d come here one day. OCU was going to be everything that school wasn’t. And it is. Small class sizes, an actual budget, and the only animals around are the ones that actually care about learning. But something’s not right, and it’s been drilling me like a toothache since I got here. It’s not because I’m dumb. At least, I hope not.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Finn said. ‘History’s your thing. You aced every test we did. Which countries were part the Triple Agreement during the First World Schism?’

‘Grand Britannia, Larenne and Volkovia.’

‘Right. And who ruled over Grand Britannia during the Boyd period?’

‘Eccles the Ninth, Domon the First, Billy the Tenth, Billy the Eleventh, Billy the Twelfth, Margaret the Bloodied and her tragically short-lived haemophiliac son Pip.’

‘And lastly, when did the Great Homogenisation take place?’

‘Six million years ago, although some historians argue that it’s still happening to this day. Various feral wilding species evolved into erudites like yours truly by developing similar traits all around the same time, namely larger brains, more dextrous digits and bipedal movement.’ Teal stopped for a moment to catch his breath.

‘See,’ Finn said. ‘Whatever it is, it’s got nothing to do with you being stupid. And you told me just yesterday that you were already starting the reading for term three. So what’s really going on? Is all this just setup for a punchline?’

He shook his head. ‘I don’t think I belong here. Nothing we’re doing this term is sinking in. I read every chapter from back to front, and all the additional reading too. It was like trying to read the dictionary upside-down. I thought I’d start next term’s reading, because I’ve already given up on this one, but that one’s even worse. It’s just... words.’

‘History’s felt like that for me since primary school.’

‘Yeah, but it would.’

‘Hey!’

Teal smirked. ‘But yeah, it’s been bad. And the idea of getting into so much debt for this? I broke it down to figure out how much each lecture was costing us. I wouldn’t recommend it.’ He patted his pocket to make sure the resignation form was still there. It was a small comfort that it was. ‘So maybe all this isn’t for me.’

‘Maybe? So you still don’t know?’

‘I’m pretty sure I do. But I’m all ears for anything that

might sway me.'

'Well Doctor Singer's coming back for the Approaches to History module.'

'Doctor Singer? Damn it, where's that resignation form? I'm leaving right now!' Teal groped around in his pocket for it.

'No, you can't!' Finn laughed, jumping for the form that Teal held high in the air. 'You can't leave me with her!'

'You just watch me!'

Besuited tutors with briefcases marched stiffly around them as the two laughed together. For just a moment, they were blissfully oblivious to the rest of the world.

'Ahem.' And then they weren't.

'Sorry, Professor.'

'Mr Arke, really? I'd expect someone of your bearing to strive to be better representation.'

After a protracted apology, they escaped through a set of double doors. Teal's cheeks were on fire. Finn kept looking back, grinning from ear to ear with his wolf hat under his arm like they were kits again. But they barely turned the corner before the smile was wiped off his face.

They'd arrived at the student centre. Teal stopped dead. It was like reality suddenly hit him. This could be the last time he ever walked through these walls. The mail slot was right there. In ten seconds, his degree at Opus City University could be over. His mouth was suddenly feeling very dry.

'I'm sorry,' he said. He had to say something.

'Hey, it's no big deal.' Finn laughed, but Teal could see how nervous he was underneath the smile. 'If uni isn't for you, then it isn't for you. That's it. I'll be fine, really. It's you I'm worried about. My granddad still has a vacancy over by Drumlin Street if you're interested in getting into finance.'

Teal grimaced. 'I think I'd rather be shot.'

'Talk to my uncle and we can get that arranged too,' Finn grinned. 'But seriously, just do one thing first.'

'What's that?'

Finn reached out and lifted Teal's paw from his pocket. It was clenching the crumpled resignation form as tightly as it could.

'Wait until you get back first. You get stuck in your head sometimes. Just know that this is really what you want. Heck, if you still think it's the right thing to do, I'll come in with you, and we can paper aeroplane that thing right into the slot from the entrance! After our coffee date, of course.'

'Our coffee what?'

Finn seemed to realise his mistake. His ears rose straight up before his paws could pull them down again. It was one of those rare times in which, red-faced and wide-eyed, he was well and truly speechless. But that didn't stop him from trying to pretend it never happened.

'Are you deaf?' he mocked, nudging Teal's shoulder. 'The date on which we next have coffee. And after winning the competition, you're definitely buying. It's only fair. A holiday for a coffee? Now that's a bargain if I ever saw one!'

'But you said... you said a coffee date. We're just going out for coffee, right? This is just a day out.'

Finn's ears drooped down over his eyes. 'If that's what you want it to be. We don't even have to have coffee. Only if you want to.'

The corridor went silent for a moment as the two foxes just stood there, staring down at the ground.

Slowly but surely, Teal felt something blossoming in his chest. At first, he thought it was just anxiety as usual, but as it grew and grew, he realised what he had to do. Was he crazy?

Almost certainly. But maybe everybody needed to be a little crazy sometimes. There was only one way to know for sure.

‘Yes.’

Finn’s ears pricked up. ‘What?’

‘Yes.’

Finn laughed. He looked so happy, relieved and confused, all at the same time. ‘But is that yes to having coffee, or yes to it being a date?’

Teal smiled. He reached out to hold Finn’s paw in his own. ‘Yes.’

O-Bun Sesame

‘Coffee?’

Teal barely heard him. He was deep in thought, his chin resting on one paw. ‘Huh?’

Mr Jeffries gestured to the pot. ‘In the mood for coffee?’

Teal smiled wistfully. ‘You have no idea.’

Mr Jeffries filled one of the disposable cups and slid it over. ‘Thanks.’ He broke three sugar sachets into the centre and stirred a tiny whirlpool that continued long after he took the stirrer out. After a long day, the sight was hypnotising.

‘No, thank you for coming all the way back here just to help me close up. Well, your body came back anyway. Your mind, I feel, is wandering on very different shores. What have you been dreaming about, then? Pretty vixens? Big houses? Fame and fortune?’

Teal breathed in the steam and took a sip. ‘Just coffee.’

Mr Jeffries laughed. ‘Coffee, eh?’ He poured a cup straight from the pot and downed it in one, smacking his lips together. The empty mug was still steaming. ‘I long for the days when I could sit back and dream about coffee. Like when I first came here to start a new life. But you get married, and things get

complicated. If I talked about half of the things that are running through my head at night, I'm quite sure they'd lock me up and throw away the key.'

Teal couldn't help but question how many of the employees of O-Bun Sesame would be surprised if that happened, and more importantly, how many would even mind it. But he kept the thought to himself. Mr Jeffries hadn't broken a single thing since the sauce incident, and that was on top of giving Teal his time off. This was one of the good days.

'I'm sure everyone's like that, Mr Jeffries,' Teal lied. He took another sip of coffee, but he drank too much too quickly. He hissed through his teeth and stuck his singed tongue out.

'Maybe.' Mr Jeffries rubbed the back of his head. 'Are you sure you can't stay any longer? It's always nice to have a friendly face to talk to, and friends are hard to come by here.'

'Definitely.' Teal sniffed. As much as it pained him, he had to stand firm. If he gave Mr Jeffries an extra five minutes, he'd find himself four hours shorter.

Mr Jeffries shook the pot enticingly. 'Not even for one more cup?'

Teal pushed his own cup away. 'I'm sorry. Any other day, but not today.'

He put the pot back down. 'I understand. Sometimes, I feel like I ask too much. I know how hard you all work, just to keep this silly little dream alive for another day. This city is like an ocean, and I was fool enough to set off in a leaky rowboat. The strongest wings in the world couldn't scoop out water forever. Every day, it fills up just a little more.'

He sighed. 'Apologies. I shouldn't talk like that. There's nothing wrong with the water; my son loves it. We went fishing only last month with his brand-new fishing rod.' His face brightened up suddenly. 'Do you know what he wishes to

be when he grows up?’

‘What?’

‘A fish.’

Teal smiled.

‘A real-life, scaly, flippy-floppy fish. I asked him why, and do you know what he said? He said it’s because nobody’s better at catching fish than another fish.’ He took his phone out and showed Teal a picture of him with his wing around an excited-looking flying fox pup. The pup was holding a fish almost half his size, gawping at the camera with two enormous eyes. ‘That’s Adika.’

‘He looks just like you.’

‘He wouldn’t be happy to hear you say that,’ he laughed. ‘But perhaps it’s better than looking like a fish. At least a little. I won’t pretend I’d care for him any less if he looked like the creature of the deep. My pups are the best of me. I’d do anything to keep them happy.’

Teal’s phone alarm buzzed in his pocket. He jumped to his hind paws at once. ‘Sorry Mr Jeffries,’ he muttered, taking one final sip of coffee. ‘I completely lost track of time. I’ve got to go.’

‘But there are still a few things that need doing. Like... the windows haven’t been sprayed down.’

‘I did the windows before we broke for lunch,’ Teal said. He poured the remainder of his coffee away. ‘But it was nice talking to you. Everything should be fine for when O-Bun Sesame opens again.’

‘Please stay.’

Teal swung his coat on before he could change his mind. ‘Thank you for letting me take the time off sir, and best of luck with the festival. Good night.’

The flying fox hung his head and gave a reluctant nod.

‘Night.’

Teal flicked the rest of the lights off, save for the kitchen. Mr Jeffries leaned over and grabbed the coffee pot. He gulped down his third cup before Teal could close the door.

Streets

‘He’ll be fine. Melanie is right, I can’t let him push me around. If I worked anywhere else, this wouldn’t even be an issue.’

He was wearing a scarf over his mouth, compressing all his whiskers together, but that didn’t stop every word misting out in front of him. His nose twitched behind the fabric. It was so cold. The sooner he got to the station, the better. ‘But who else has he got? Maybe if I—’

His shoe skidded on a pile of rubbish bags that seemed to come out of nowhere. By some miracle, he managed to stay standing. But he barely had his footing back together before they came to life before his very eyes. He almost had a heart attack.

‘Spare some change?’

It was an old, ragged-looking crow. Even the black bags couldn’t cover the mess of his atrophied wings underneath him. When he went to raise one, it haemorrhaged feathers all over the ground. The smell was unbelievable.

‘I’m sorry.’ Teal was. But he kept his distance. You couldn’t be too careful in Opus City. ‘I don’t have any money on me.’ True to his word, he turned his pockets out.

The crow cawed mournfully. Teal felt a stab of regret. If he hadn’t already bought his train ticket, he might have been able to get him a sandwich. They looked at each other, and then something seemed to change in the crow’s eyes. The bags rustled underneath him. ‘You had enough to do that,’ he

said quietly.

‘Do what?’

‘Paint yourself like one of them queers on parade!’ he shrieked. ‘Dyed and trimmed and all prissed up like a back-alley fag. A back-alley fag! A back-alley fag!’

Teal marched off down the street, the crow’s enraged caws echoing hotly in his ears. When he finally came to the illuminated Greater Prospects Station sign, he slapped it with a relieved paw before continuing down the steps, skipping three at a time.

Greater Prospects Station

In the cold silence, he waited for the train. He couldn’t risk having his earphones on, so his foot tapped along to a song in his head as he watched the carriages on the opposite platform pull away. When they were gone, he looked up at the board. The next train home wasn’t scheduled to arrive until six.

His eyes flitted to the clock in the corner. It was 5:22. He stared at it intently. After what felt like five minutes, it finally ticked over. 5:23. One down, thirty-seven to go. He sighed.

Even on a Sunday, it was rarely this quiet. Aside from a few yawning animals in business suits, he was alone. And without any distractions, he began to feel guilt creeping up his back.

Mr Jeffries may have been a terrible boss, but he wasn’t a bad guy. He had a family to look after, and like he said himself, times were tough. If Teal were in his position, he’d certainly never ask for the kind of help that Mr Jeffries was getting. But he’d never forget it either. At a restaurant, there was always something that needed doing, and there was certainly no shortage of things to fix, clean or replace at O-Bun Sesame.

It was a lot warmer too.

Teal rubbed his paws together and sighed. ‘Am I’m just a moron?’ he asked nobody in particular. As if to answer the question, his scarf slid from his face and plodded onto the floor. Grumbling away to himself, he bent down to pick it up.

After a few good brushes, he slung the scarf back around his neck. It was strange. For some reason, it felt like there were eyes on him. He slowly straightened up.

There was someone staring at him from the adjacent platform. He leaned closer and squinted. It was tough to make anything out amid the dim white station lights, but the more he stared, the more it looked like the homeless pudú that Teal had helped before.

‘Hey!’ Teal shouted. He raised a paw. ‘Nook, is that—’

A train screamed by out of nowhere, forcing him to shield his eyes from the sudden blinding lights. Blasts of icy wind shot straight through him. He stumbled back, his scarf and coat billowing around him, but it just kept going, one empty carriage after another shrieking its way through the platform.

Just when it seemed like it was never going to end, the final carriage disappeared through the tunnel, and the station was plunged into darkness and silence once more. Teal was left clinging onto his coat, gasping for breath. The stranger was nowhere to be seen.

His heart pounding, he retreated to one of the benches to get himself together. All his fur was standing on end. It took a significant amount of coercing to smooth it all back down.

When he was finally done, he leaned back against the wall and sighed. It had been a hell of a day. He cracked an eye open to check the notice board. The clock was at 5:24.

‘Forget this,’ he muttered. He slipped the scarf over his nose, pushed himself off the bench and made for the exit. ‘I

think I'll take that cup of coffee now, Mr Jeffries.'

Shoving a paw in his pocket, Teal flicked on some Mr Miso. It was a long trek back to O-Bun Sesame, and he wouldn't be doing it alone.

O-Bun Sesame

'Mr Jeffries? Mr Jeffries?'

The door appeared to be stuck, but that was nothing new. After a bit of jiggling, it creaked right open. The top bolt had been lazily latched.

Teal poked his head around the door. All the lights were off. He opened the door a crack more and stared into the darkness. He must have been around somewhere, because even Mr Jeffries never forgot to lock up. But then why was it so dark, and why wasn't his coat hanging on the hook?

Teal had a creeping suspicion that he wasn't alone. Sure enough, when he unclipped one of his earphones, he could hear noises coming from inside.

He closed the door behind him and crept forwards. Something didn't feel right, so he kept his voice low. The smell of cleaning fluids was still heavy in the air from earlier. 'Mr Jeffries?'

Using the flash on his phone as a torch, he followed the noise all the way to the kitchen, where he saw that the front counter was still lit up. What a relief. He smiled and turned the torch off. Then, he heard the unmistakable sound of a till being opened.

He dropped to the floor at once, pressing his back to the kitchen countertop. This could mean only one thing. O-Bun Sesame was being robbed! His paws shook as he pressed them to the floor, which was still drying from when he mopped it less than an hour ago.

Teal had no idea what to do. He was pretty sure he wouldn't be getting a bonus if he risked his hide for the sake of a quiet Sunday's haul. But in good conscience, he couldn't just leave either. O-Bun Sesame had enough problems as it was. It wouldn't be able to take the hit. He listened out for more noises amid the rustling, and he was startled to hear someone talk.

'Is that it?' they muttered by the front counter. The fur on Teal's neck stood on end. He knew that voice. But it couldn't be. Could it? He had to know for sure. Holding his breath, he flattened his ears and slowly, inch by inch, he raised his head.

Mr Jeffries was standing there as plain as day, rummaging through the tills. 'But... it's his restaurant,' Teal whispered to himself. He was so confused. He continued watching the flying fox as he counted out each stack of banknotes. When he was done, he shoved a small wad of them in his coat pocket, and then he went methodically through the receipts, scoring through some and ripping up others.

'Unless... ' Teal ducked down and covered his mouth. 'He's stealing from himself.'

He couldn't believe it at first. Slowly but surely, however, it all started to make sense. O-Bun Sesame never seemed to make enough money, and yet when they were open, they were just as busy as any of the restaurants in Clearwater Shopping Centre. Everybody seemed to put it down to poor management. In a way, they weren't even wrong.

For some time, Teal just crouched there, listening to the trills from the till and the rustling of banknotes. It didn't feel real, and the strong stench of floor cleaner was making it harder to think. He pinched himself, but even that didn't seem to be enough. He barely felt it. He unsheathed one of his claws and held it over his forearm. One... two... three!

‘Ouch!’ Okay, so it was definitely real. But now he had another problem. He wasn’t dreaming. This was all really happening.

He had no idea what to do. His paws leapt to his pockets for anything that might help. One of them brushed against his phone. Maybe he should film it. It would be hard to argue against him if he had pictures, or better yet, footage of the whole thing. But what if the flash went off, or he got caught?

He clicked the phone onto silent mode and left it where it was. He wasn’t going to put any of this to film.

More than anything, Teal just felt sick. His mind was racing back to all the times he’d stayed behind to help out. Everybody had done so much for Mr Jeffries, for the restaurant, despite knowing full well that they’d be better off anywhere else. Underneath all the minor gripes and petty antagonism, they genuinely cared about his dream, and they wanted to help him make it a reality.

If it was anybody else, he was sure the rage would have already started building. But... not Mr Jeffries.

Less than an hour ago, they were sharing coffee and looking at pictures of his son. The son that he’d do anything for...

Teal backed away from the counter. He had to get out of here. Without even daring to breath, he flattened himself against the floor and crawled on his knees and front paws, barely registered the icy feel of the tiles, or the cleaning fluid soaking into his trousers. He was numb, utterly numb. He just wanted to be anywhere else.

Slowly but surely, he made his way forwards, resisting the urge to stop and turn around every time the till chimed, or Mr Jeffries started talking. Once or twice, the restaurant went deathly quiet, and he had to fight his instincts screaming at

him to get up and make a run for it.

He was trying to sneak away from a flying fox. So he went slowly and methodically, one limb at a time. No sound.

When he finally made it to the back of kitchen, he dared to look back, just once. Mr Jeffries was leaning against the front counter, staring out at the empty shopping centre. He let out a shaky breath and turned back around. He was so close—

His tail caught on the mop bucket. He hadn't seen it.

Silently, he watched the handle of the mop judder around, back and forth, before it finally slipped out of the groove and began to fall. It came down so slowly, it was almost comical. He put his paws over his eyes and braced himself for the worst.

But the sound never came. Eventually, when he could bring himself to open his eyes, he found the mop handle resting on his tail. He almost wished Melanie had been there, just to see the look on her face. 'I'd like to see a nubber try that,' he thought grimly to himself.

He replaced the handle against the side as slowly as he dared, and then continued crawling. The moment he reached the backroom, he got to his hind paws, slipped out through the exit and closed the door behind him as if he'd never been there.

It was going to be a long journey home.

Dreamer's Eyrie

Teal's clothes stunk of cleaning fluid. His teeth were chattering, he could barely feel his hind paws, and by the time he made it to his street sign, he was all but ready to collapse.

'Dreamer's Eyrie,' he rasped in relief, the scarf muffling his words. His lips curled into some facsimile of a smile. He patted it as he went by, melting a paw print in the thin layer of

frost. ‘You’re almost there, T. Almost there...’

Before his home even came into view, he could hear shouting in the street. He sighed. He didn’t want any trouble. But when he got closer, he saw that it was only Mama Poss.

She was standing on the pavement with one paw on her hip, looking increasingly exasperated. Her tail lashed by her side. The other paw was holding onto her daughter, whose own tail was wrapped tightly around a nearby lamp post. Every time Mama Poss tried to move her, she hissed and held firm. A green party hat sat skewed atop her head.

From the living room window of the Poss residence, her various siblings, similarly adorned with coloured party hats, were poking their tiny noses over the windowsill, curiously watching all the commotion.

‘You’re coming home right now, young lady. Don’t you bare your teeth at me!’

They both froze as Teal lumbered by. After a few seconds, Mama Poss let go of her paw to greet him. Her daughter responded by immediately wrapping both of her arms around the lamp post and sticking her tongue out.

‘Bah. You ruin your party however you want.’ Mama Poss sighed and turned to Teal. ‘Tough day, hon?’

He stopped for a moment to draw the scarf down. ‘You have no idea.’

Home

The water was scalding on his back. He could barely see a thing through all the steam, but then, he didn’t need to. He just lifted his head back, closed his eyes and felt the water cascade down his face. Were it not for a few minor inconveniences, like the water bill, or the pressing need to breathe, he could have happily stayed like that for hours.

The way it pelted through his whiskers, thrumming against his skin and thundering relentlessly upon his ears, it was like he was in another world. All his insecurities and nagging doubts disappeared beneath the deluge like his entire body was being baptised in holy water. There were no thoughts. Only warmth, and a serene feeling of peace. He had no senses. They were all drowned out. There was only a dull impression of sound, a dull impression of light from the blurry pink blotches drumming over his closed eyelids, melting to darkness. There was almost nothing left, and even that was fading away, receding slowly, receding slowly...

And then he had to breathe.

He doubled over, gasping for air with both paws pressed to the cold bathroom tiles. His fur clung to his body, heavy and matted. Gradually, his heart stopped pounding. Water dripped down his cheeks.

He took a deep breath, held it for a few moments, and then released it slowly.

‘What a day...’

Words couldn’t begin to describe it. There were so many things to think about, Teal didn’t know where to start. It was starting to twist his stomach already. So instead, he turned the heat up and ducked back under the water.

It had been a long day. He was going to need a longer shower.

* * *

He didn’t want to be ungrateful. It was an amazing prize, and he was so happy to be going to Sakurai. He really was. It was still hard to believe that it was really happening. He’d never won so much as a scratch card before. At any other time in his life, he was positive that he wouldn’t be able to think about anything else in the world.

But not now.

After all these years, Finn had finally asked him out. And Teal said yes. He actually said yes. Well, technically, that was only after Finn tried to retract the question, but the point was that they were both dumb enough to have agreed upon a date. And that was amazing. Teal had never dared to dream that something like this could happen to him. Finn hadn't treated him differently to any other fox since the day they met each other. Teal didn't have to hide around him. He could just be himself, and vice versa.

And he couldn't lose that.

He couldn't drag Finn into his world when it was falling apart around him. He was already a hairpin away from quitting his degree, and if he wasn't good enough for university, who would want him? Not to mention that his job was as good as over, one way or another. At best, his boss was going through some bad times with a callous disregard for his employees, and at worst, he was a liar, a scoundrel and a criminal that Teal was already covering for by virtue of his silence. And this was on top of all the looks and comments that he got from strangers every single day.

No, he could never put Finn through that. He deserved better. In another life, maybe. Another time...

He sat with his back to the wall, breathing in the steam and listening to the pitter-patter of running water. Any hint of kitchen grease and chemical cleaner had been thoroughly scrubbed away, replaced with the tang of bergamot and sea salt.

He played with the fur on his arm, watching it part beneath his dripping fingers. 'Why so blue?' he mumbled to himself. 'Dyed and trimmed and all prissed up...'

The clear water dribbled down, joining the stream into the

plughole. Watching the stream intently, he ran a paw along his arm from top to bottom. It was still clear. He did it again, and then once more, his eyes never leaving the stream. But it still ran clear.

So he kept at it, going faster and faster until drops of water were splashing against the shower curtain. Any second now, he'd see a hint of colour, and then the entire stream would be running blue like a leaking fountain pen. He just wasn't trying hard enough.

Before long, his arm started to burn. But he kept at it, watching the stream and willing himself to see the smallest splash of it in the water. A speck. An atom. The hint of an atom. Anything to show that there was something else underneath all the blue.

There was a growing urge to unsheathe his claws and scratch it away. Maybe that was the last step. He could feel them itching to come out, restless. Small tufts of fur started to wash down the stream. He knew the red fur was under there somewhere. The real fur—

He yelped.

The claws went back in immediately.

He sat back, breathing heavily, and let the paw drop onto the non-slip mat below. His heart was racing. Tentatively, he raised his forearm and held it up to the water. The fur parted, and he saw the tiniest nick underneath. He prodded it with a finger.

The shower water trickled from his arm, tinging the stream a smoky red before it disappeared down the drain.

'Grow up,' he sighed. The shower had gone on for long enough. He flicked the water off and leaned over to grab a towel from the rail.

* * *

His face always took the longest. He couldn't wait for the summer, when his fur would be shorter and more manageable. Until then, there were a lot more visits to the barber in store. Resisting the urge to shake, he opened the window, swaddled himself in towels and got to work.

To his relief, the mirror was all fogged up. He couldn't stand the way he looked when he was wet. His cheeks vanished, and he instantly became half the size. There was a reason shampoo adverts favoured otters, as well as the other animals that always came home with the swimming medals every four years. It was because they didn't look like anaemic chickens when they came back out. He just had to get dry as fast as possible.

For the sake of it, he unhooked the blower from the wall and pointed the large grated nozzle to his face. He flicked the switch on.

Nothing.

He sighed and flicked it off again. The blower hadn't been working for months. He could only dream of the bathrooms at his friends' houses, let alone the ones in hotels, which came equipped with body-length blowers that you could pull straight out of the wall and blast yourself dry with in seconds. That was one thing he had to look forward to in Sakurai.

For now, he needed endless patience and a pile of towels. At least he had the towels.

The cuts on his fingers were doing much better. He ran a thumb along them, but there was no pain. A few more days and he wouldn't need the plasters anymore. His cheeks were starting to come back too. He looked at his blurry blob of a reflection and ran a paw through the fluff. It may have flicked drops everywhere, but it also bounced back. It was a start.

Laughter drifted in through the open window. Mama Poss

was bidding farewell to some of the guests outside. It seemed the birthday party was at an end. Wait, the birthday party...?

He slapped his forehead. 'Happy Birthday, Mum.'

In all the furore, he'd almost forgotten. 'I, uh... hope you liked the flowers. Sorry, it's been a hell of a day. I love you tons, and I hope wherever you are, you don't miss us as much as we miss you.' He didn't think it was possible, but he thought it was worth saying anyway.

He couldn't help but wonder what she'd think of the fox he'd grown up to be. Lanky, blue and gay, all in equal measure. Would she be proud? He rubbed his eyes. He hoped so. But in reality, that was something he could never know.

There was a slight tickling sensation on his nose. He opened his eyes again. To his surprise, a tiny moth was sitting on it, fluttering its wings. He almost went cross-eyed trying to get it in focus. Was it the same one from earlier?

Either way, it seemed content to simply perch there, wiggling its little antennas around. He couldn't help but smile. Maybe it wasn't the end of the world after all. He took his smallest finger and stroked along its back. It seemed to like that.

He couldn't imagine saying goodbye to this place. Who was going to fish the poor moth from the plant pot? And how would his father cope on his own? Even if the answer was that he'd probably be just fine, that hardly made it any easier. He didn't want him to think he was abandoning him. 'I'm not gone, Dad. Even when I'm in Sakurai, I'm not gone...'

His eyes widened. With the moth still perched on his nose, he leaned carefully over to the mirror and drew in the steam. One letter dripped down after another, until the two words stood before him, showing his reflection clearly. His two-word pledge, and his promise to return.

‘Not Gone...’

Author's Note:

'Thank you...'

Thank you for reading Chapter Two of *The End Where It Begins!* I hope you enjoyed it! Keep your eyes peeled for Chapter Three, 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!