Summary

Private helps Skipper overcome his fear of needles. Eventually. (sequel to Watermelon Snow)
Chapter 1

It is I, King Julien, who is to be telling you de most outrageousest story of de silly penguins. If I did not be seeing it with my own mesmerizing orbs, I would not believe it. For de parts which I did not see first hand, you may be sure dat it happened just as I am telling you because I am de best picture puzzler put togetherer. Sit back on your loungey chair and enjoy.

It’s all free.

Mort and Maurice will serve you smoothies while you listen. De story be free, de smoothies be not. I recommend de Mango Jackfruit with extra jackfruit because it is de most expensivest but, you know, entirely worth it. I start in Julianuary and who knows when we will be ending?

Hush now.

Your king begins.

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Title: Undertow

Author: pronker

Rating: M

Characters: Canon and a few OCs

Era: Sometime after Watermelon Snow, which is set after the TV show with the exceptions of the episodes Kaboom and Kabust and Skipper Makes Perfect.

Disclaimer: I make no profit from this fanfiction set in Dreamworks’ Penguins of Madagascar franchise and I do not own the franchise.

Summary: Private helps Skipper overcome his fear of needles. Eventually. [Gen, het, and slash. Eventually.]

A/N First chapter of Undertow was published on fanfictionDOTnet and on this archive as “Trial And Error”, which is gen or het, depending on how you read it; in slashier form, it serves as the kickoff chapter of a longer fic now. Reading Watermelon Snow is not necessary to understand this story; general upshot is that the team returned from a sabbatical to Central Park Zoo with the Kico (Kowalski and Rico) relationship on its way to being established. What other ‘ships set sail results from Undertow.

Thanks to the sites furaffinity and deviantArt for supplying the mental image of a penguin with a human-type cock of decent size coupled with an adequate and true-to-life vent for fun timez and no exterior human-type balls. That image takes one’s breath away and is the foundation of my idea for writing penguin love scenes. I raised various species of birds commercially for years and take it from me, realistic bird sex would be over with in 15 seconds or less. It was the same with raising rabbits. Ho hum. In birds’ and rabbits’ favor, they are able to do it several times daily, so there’s that.

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“If Namath can do it, so can I!” Skipper reclined on his side on Marlene’s bed, stretched his legs
coyly and propped up his head on a beguiling flipper.

“Namath? He’s from, like, ice ages ago! How old are you, Skipper?”

He winked at her and her heart skipped a beat. “Need to know, Marlene.”

“Yeah whatever keep your secrets.” She rolled her eyes. “Pretend Kowalski’s freeze ray zapped you when I get done posing you, mmmkay?”

Marlene adjusted his top knee to cross his other one to touch the bed’s surface. He winked again and she flushed as she aimed a cuff at his earhole, quickly enough for him not to dodge her blow. She ruffled her blanket artfully around him to suggest movements from the recent past, blushing even more. She tilted his head up. She was satisfied with the pose.

Skipper was not. “Does the model ever give suggestions? This one has a doozy.”

She crossed her eyes before narrowing them. “Okay, yeah, I’ll use it but only if I like it. That’s why I’m the master and you’re the —”

“Padawan?” he said solemnly.

Marlene blew a raspberry. “Go on, you silly! Hurry up! I’m losing the north light here.”

“Slip me one of those pansies.” He pointed to her vase, which was out of his reach.

“Huh?”

“From your bouquet, Marlene. That’s the right name for the purple flower, am I right?”

“Pblbpbpbl, Kowalski must have told you.” She passed him one.

He adjusted it upright in front of himself at the natural hinge between legs and torso. She could tell he was barely holding back the chortles by the way his shoulders shook. He looked up at her with doe eyes. “Purple on black and white, outstanding, don’t you think?” He waggled the posy.

She took two steps back to frame the pose between her paws a la Renoir. She shifted from portrait to landscape and back again. She covered one eye. “Needs something.”

“Aw, come on! It’s perfect!”

She realized that it was a daunting thing for a commander to share or give up command, but she was certain he’d like her addition to his suggestion. She selected two more pansies from her vase, opened his grip on the original flower and pressed the three stems together before closing his grip again. “Hold still while I adjust your, your —”

“Stance?”

“Uh, I was going to say accoutrements but okay, stance will do. Only you’re not standing.” She placed his flipper closer to his body and stiffened the pansy stems. “We’ll need to get this sketch done quickly before the flowers wilt.”

“Mine won’t dare wilt. And what’s a cootermon? Is that some artist lingo like easel and Ben-Day?”

“Never you mind. Hold that position and look pleasant. No, not like that. Something else.”

“This?”
“Better, but with less determination. Think of coming home to a nice warm lair and a nice warm Private.” She noticed the pansies strain upward. “Ooops! Didn’t mean to — ”

“Yeah, once the mind starts on a certain direction — well, you know how that goes. In my case, it’s not likely anything will ever come of it.” He closed his eyes and the pansies shivered once and then subsided. “Okay, um, Marlene. Operation: Poser is a go.”

“I didn’t agree to that name.” She hustled her easel in place and made broad circles with her pencil. She squinted harder at him after one minute had passed. “Breathe, Skipper, it’s okay to breathe.”

“Lying about isn’t my thing. I at least look at picture books when I goldbrick around the HQ.” She had heard of models needing conversation to stay focused and multi-tasked for all she was worth. “Oh yeah? What do you guys subscribe to?” She outlined boxes, circles and spirals and now the body was done. The facial expression would be more of a challenge.

“Ground-To-Air Missiles Quarterly, Tanks Unlimited, Superior Strategies complete with pie charts, stuff like that. Now and then Penguins Illustrated.” He paused. “The annual beach bunny issue falls apart three days after it’s delivered.”

The blanket’s ripples gave her fits. “Mmmhmmm.” She could only imagine how difficult drawing would be if animals wore clothes. The shading she could fill in later. Skipper was showing signs of restlessness. Oh well, vigor was only one of the things she liked about him. Hmm, vigor …

“Dang.”

“What is it?”

“A change up in the pose, sorry, my friend.” She erased the bottom third of the body. “I had a brainstorm.”

“Marlene, I’ve got things to do this morning — ”

“Okay! Two more minutes then you can split!” She scrubbed furiously at the sketchpad with the eraser. “Shoot, I dropped my rubber. Toss it back, would you?”

“Your … rubber?”

“The eraser, Mr. Bad Pun. See it bounced by the bed oh never mind I’ll get it — ”

“Don’t get your tail in a twist, Ms. Otter.” He moved from her meticulous posing and she groaned. After a moment’s fishing by the bed, he tossed the eraser to her. She replaced it on her easel’s tray.

“Before you settle, here’s a better pose. Just relax and let me position you.”

“That tickles!”

“Sorry sorry, now recline again on your left side. Flipper under head, yeah like that. Left leg crooked slightly, no a little more. Now angle the right leg up like this” — she slid a paw behind the knee — “my goodness, you’re ticklish! I’m barely touching you! Relax the right foot — what’s the matter with your pinkie claw? It’s shiny and new —”

“I got hurt on Åland blah blah can we just get on with it?”

“Oh! That must have pained you!”

“I barely felt it. I was busy fighting a sasquatch. Come on, let’s do this thing and I’ll get out of your
fur.” He softened. “Not that I’m unwelcome, I know. Stop the pity party, okay? I hate that. The toe’s all healed up, see?” He wiggled it.

“Did the sasquatch tear into you that bad? Where was your team?”

“Yeah, Private was the only one with me that battle. Come on now, I don’t have all day.” The mood in her cave soured.

She assessed him. He was uncomfortable talking about Åland, even though he had confided early in the visit that he’d discovered deeper feelings for Private there. A story would need to be told … but not today. “Gotcha. Moving right along, Skipper, I’m ready to work.”

“Finally.”

She stifled her comeback as she shifted into artiste mode. Now the pose was perfect and she sketched the open legs’ apex garnished by the pansies and then the relaxed posture, saving the face for last. A few defining touches about the beak and she declared the first sketch complete. “All done, my friend. Thanks.”

“Okay, uh huh, sure. I’m not even going to charge you.”

“Haw. Haw. Let me make tea — ”

“I’m a coffee penguin, you know that.”

“What evs. Vamoose, then. Catch you later, alligator.”

“After while, crocodile.” Action mode restored, he waddled to her drainage grate and disappeared down it.

Marlene whooshed out a breath. “Girl, you will never learn all the penguins’ secrets. Get used to it.” She sat on her bed to critique the sketch. “Hmm, not bad. A Caillebotte I am not, but not bad.”
Chapter 2

“'Bye, Momma Duck. We’ll watch the kids again as time permits, between missions.”

Momma Duck had only a tenuous grasp of their schedule. It was enough that the team did all the heavy lifting as far as defense and protection concerned her small family; in short, their relationship was on a need to know basis. Skipper would not have been Skipper without confessing a little curiosity, though.

Skipper assumed that she avoided thinking about her lost fifth duckling because the Snakehead Trout had paid for that outrageous carnage with its life. She had declined to taste the sushi that Rico chef’d up from its exploded remains, though. The commander appreciated the way she included the whole team in her next remark, a sure sign of a savvy manager of disparate personalities. He supposed raising rumbustious ducklings was not much different than leading rumbustious commandos. “Private and you and Kowalski and uh, Rico, even, did a good job. No missing feathers this time!”

Aw, she was joking. The last babysitting job they did resulted in maybe a few primaries lost and not one secondary feather, and hey, the kids weren’t even flight-capable yet! “Yeh, hee hee, good one, Missus. Um, well, I’ve got things to do and Poppa Duck is likely waiting for you all … ” Now this was fishing. She’d never mentioned a Poppa Duck or brought him along to meet his benefactors. He didn’t even show up for Kidsmas. This was angling for intel for no good reason other than nosiness. Skipper gave himself a mental slap on the wrist, yet awaited her answer anyway.

This was evidently not Momma Duck’s first time at the evading-a-trap rodeo. “Nope, nobody’s waiting tonight. See you around the pond, everyone! Come along, kids, race you home!”

Eggy edged out Samuel for the lead in the staged dash for their pond while his momma made straining faces as if she were trying her hardest to keep up. She threw a saucy wink over her shoulder at the penguins as she trailed her power waddling foursome towards the park. A stray breeze picked up yellow fluff lost in their shenanigans, probably from Ramona and Bradley’s gorbals kiss contest.

Kowalski squatted to the dainty baby down and rolled it into a ball between his flippers. He let it fall as he straightened again and it drifted back to earth once more, followed by four pairs of eyes.

At this time of night after dinnertime when Alice had quit for the day, the zoo settled into post-prandial stupor at the drop of a herring. The patter of little duckling feet faded into a deep, restful evening stillness. From Roy’s habitat came a snort and then no more sounds from any of the habitats.

More minutes of quiet than usual meant brooding at the departure of the duck family. With a grunt, Skipper wiped tenderness off his own face and drew conclusions from surveying the various yearning expressions on the part of his team: Kowalski’s naked hunger for a baby, Private’s wistful gaze accompanied by soft sighs, and Rico’s impenetrable stare not at Momma Duck’s cute tail waggle as usual but at her bumptious crew of ducklings.

“Think of monster trucks, men,” the commander assayed, but none of them were having it as a sugar titty this time. “You can’t always get what you want,” he added in a gentler tone.

Kowalski shook himself out of his mood. “Barry is a frog and frogs can change sex male to female.” Good redeye gravy, from which sludgy mental corner of the smartest penguin he knew had that come? Skipper hastened to set Kowalski straight as Rico and Private headed down the hatchway.

“Penguins are not frogs, Kowalski. Rico can never be a frog.” Add this to the short list of ‘things I
neverthought I’d say,’ thought Skipper.

“AndI would never want him to be.”

Kowalski got the look that Skipper had seen on Private’s face, the yearning for offspring denied. “Never?” Skipper asked.

“No, never. He’s perfect.” Kowalski sulled up and since now there was defense of a lover coupled with defense of the most inarticulate of their team, Skipper had better watch his step. Having Rico as partner made Kowalski feistier in some ways; Skipper supposed it was the confidence he exuded now that he had someone who loved him back with no reservations, unlike Doris. He decided to pursue what they were talking about before Momma Duck had swung by to collect her crew.

“What makes you think of Private as girly, anyway?”

Kowalski floundered as if he scrolled down his mental screen for a glib reply from Dr. Phil. “Oh, um, you know, the whole quilting and knitting and clucky over the quackers and collecting tea cozies thing — ”

“That was not my Private! That was my Private’s Uncle Nigel.” Ahah, thought Skipper, an opening. Parry away any thrusts against his crush, despite nobody on the team knowing he had one. On Private, innocent sweet adorable sexy — he stopped the personal litany of Private’s attractions when Kowalski looked at him in an odd way. “Nigel collected the tea cozy doilies or whatever the hell those things are, I mean, and, by the by, I collect, too.”

There! Even better! Make this a way to critique the naysayer of a hobby that his commanding officer enjoyed. Skipper warmed to his subject. “I collect National Park souvenir thimbles, remember, and even though we’ve never been to Yellowstone, I shall and will fill in that last slot in my Mattel ThimbleKeeper!” He was nearly out of breath. “Soon!”

What the hell was up with his second now? Kowalski got this absolutely disgusting look of knowing on his smug pan. He even patted Skipper on the shoulder before Skipper edged out of range. Skipper felt his brow dip low in an ominous frown that generally spooked the whillikers out of his team, but instead made Kowalski back down and off and away after a rueful shake of the head.

“My error, sir. He’s not at all a twirlabout nancy — ”

“Don’t say it even once!” Yearning for what he couldn’t have followed by more yearning of the same kind followed by the defense technique of Routine Thirty-Two: Confuse And Distract managed to make Skipper unsure, which he always hated, er, strongly disliked. And now his blood pressure shot to the ionosphere without any sort of battle stitch. What was he doing, getting this emotional about a simple untrue phrase, and and and thimbles? Buck Rockgut would be ashamed of him; “Regroup, Emo Boy!” he’d rasp.

Okay, Skipper, you’re going overboard with the feelings, so shove them into a little ball and swallow them. Brown Bomber sakes’ alive, in another minute you’d lay Kowalski out cold. You’re better at commanding than that. Skipper hauled in the hawser to drop anchor in a calmer lagoon. “I mean, um, I guess I should know my own men enough to know that they’re one hundred percent Antarctic male, no exceptions.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“Absolutely no exceptions.”

“Yes.”
“Of any kind. Period.”

“I agree, sir.”

“Shut up and, and go polish something until it shines. Do I have to give every damn order every damn time?”

“Aye. I mean, no, sir.”

One more thing needed saying. “And he’s going to learn to drink soon, too! I’ll see to it! Then we’ll find out about who can hold whose booze or lose brews, er, uh. Oh you know what I mean, Kowalski.”

“I do know what you mean, Skipper.”

Skipper headed for the hatch to avoid another patronizing shoulder pat. “As you were.”
Penny skipped down the Central Park bridle path as much as a police horse could skip. Her rider was taken by surprise and hauled inexpertly at her reins. “Snrrf,” she blasted from her nostrils at the pinch and settled down for ten paces. *Clip clop clip clop skip* she tried once more.

“Who was the trainer on this one?” wondered aloud the man in blue on her back. Nobody could blame him if he clouted her one, but this rider took pride in his kindness to all creatures. “Hey, there, Penny, hey there girl. Time out.” He dismounted, took the reins and drew her to the water trough alongside the smooth beaten trail. She blew on the water five times before lipping some into her mouth. She eyeballed him.

He had broad features of a human of middle years and she thought his coarse, straight black hair looked good on him, like the straight roached mane of midnight did on her sister, Colleen. He was Native American or Asian or something, she was hazy on the whole human race thing. She took in enough water to fill her belly but not enough to founder her. That had been a long ago error that nearly did her in. Her rider today was distracted and when she meandered on purpose to the Central Park Zoo coach ride stable, he loosened the reins when she nuzzled Colleen over the corral’s toprail.

“Hey, Sis, it’s hot for fall. Is that why you’re not pulling your guts out on the trails?”

Colleen nibbled the base of her sister’s ear before replying. “What a gross thing to say, Penny. My carriage isn’t that heavy.” She flicked her tail at a pesky horsefly. “Too hot? I don’t think so because Mel harnessed up Dewey and their carriage trotted about for three hours.”

“What a place of honor.” The fly returned and the two horses stood nose to tail to form a phalanx of tail defenses against pests: Penny used the fence to press against, careful not to squeeze the knee of her rider, and Colleen flicked her tail at her sister’s face through the wide fence slats to banish the fly. It gave up the pursuit of juicy horse flesh and the two whickered loud and long in triumph. For horses, it was the little things that enlivened each day. They each pulled the same face without knowing it.

Mister Ed used to make the same face for Wilbur, but Mister Ed was trying to get at the peanut butter his offscreen handler put under his upper lip. Penny and Colleen made the identical face with no such incentive. “Pbpbpbpbpl,” blustered Penny. “Father is a showman and knows how to impress the rubes. Last place in the parade of parrots, poodles and poms is perfect for a big lummox of a horse like me. Religion, drama, all the same, wow ’em with a big finish.”

“You’ve lost weight! And his flock are not rubes. That’s rude to say about animal-loving humans.”

“I’m kidding, Sis. You know that.”

Colleen rippled her own hide, which was the color of plain espresso. “Um. Yes. I knew that.”

“I’m ready for duty again after today’s exercise. Brick and Cecil will never fool me that way twice.”
Penny sighed.

Colleen was always diplomatic. “Throwing marbles under your hooves proved unique, you know, I mean no horse could have anticipated it and kept her footing — ”

“I strained every muscle I owned. The swimming therapy was nice, though.”

“How did those two escape? And what crime did they try to commit?”

“They got away with coils of copper tubing. Copper fetches a fortune nowadays and the tubing was just lying there overnight on the Sheep Meadow after the Fourth of July fireworks show. There must have been a glitch from the clean up team after the display. I overheard Brick and Cecil blather how Frances Alberta pays top dollar for copper for her metal sculptures and isn’t fussy where it comes from.”

“So your human heard them, too? It’s almost three months later, has he caught them yet?”

Sometimes Colleen showed her lack of deeper understanding of humans. After all, she pulled a glorified dray for a living, while Penny enjoyed a tight partnership with the sharpest tool in New York’s Finest police force, in Penny’s unbiased opinion. She put on her patient voice. “Sis, I’m a horse, he’s a human, so no. My ears work better than his.”

“And you can’t communicate the information, right.”

“Right, dear.” This was the time of day when Colleen’s concentration generally drifted.

“Frances Alberta is a pretty name.”

It was time to rein in Colleen’s fancies. “I suppose, but she scrabbles for a living now doing performance art at a vacant lot she got hold of somehow. She barely keeps body and soul together, as I overheard our esteemed Commissioner say.”

“Commissioner McSlade was mean to fire her.” Penny’s rider showed signs of drifting himself as he kneed Penny’s side.

Penny managed to get in the last word. “I’m on my way back home, Sis, we’ll discuss the Commissioner’s politics another time. Enjoy your day off!”

“Toodles, Sis!” Colleen watched her sister canter away.
St. Patrick’s Cathedral majesty refined the sense of otherworldliness that Padre Alfonso experienced on the steps of Chichén Itzá. The darker parts of Mesoamerican life interested him intellectually; the lighter parts of American life interested him more. He scanned the procession of animals as if he could have seen four little penguins in the building. He couldn’t, but only because their black and white forms blended so well into the shadows of the niche of La Virgen de Guadalupe. An animal in the procession might have called their pose cowering, but their leader preferred the term *stealth mode*.

“Why are we here, Skippa?”

Skipper sighed. “Ask the right way, Private.”

“Um — why are we here, sir —— ”

“Kowalski, help him out.” La Virgen provided shelter, as she had in a greater sense during Skipper’s tenure in Mexico’s jungle adventures. For today, Skipper yearned to soak in memory of when he was not so much a leader, but a follower of a great Cause under a greater leader than himself. Selecting this niche sounded self-absorbed when he thought about it, so he didn’t think very hard.

“A clue? Very well, sir. Private, why is this day different from all others? There is only one logical option.”

Rico paid no attention to the exchange. The sounds and scents of tortoises, llamas, and cockapoos surrounded him in sensory bliss. Padre Alfonso’s blessing made him want to pet every one of his fellow animals and he could hardly stand still.

“We’re here because it’s fourth October? Oh, you know I’m rubbish at maths! Just tell me!”

“Math is the purest of sciences, but math only guides us here on the proper day. Think of love.”

Private glanced at Skipper, who returned his attention to Padre Alfonso’s blessing. Of necessity, the various animals could not be expected to hold their positions for a lengthy time since they had no commando training. The only exception might be the police horse standing at attention at the caboose end of the line. She swept her ears forward to pay heed to the good father’s words, taking them to heart. Skipper did likewise because he wanted to blot away any trace of allowing his feelings for Private show to his team. In his zeal, he missed seeing the speculation and yearning wash over Private’s face.

Entranced by his leader’s focus on the occasion and wishing with all his heart to learn whatever meaning the fourth of October held, Private stuttered, “L-Love? You m-mean love for that certain Someone, or, or — ”

Kowalski turned from hauling Rico back into the shadows. The scientist realized that the overwhelming nature of the cathedral’s majesty and the presence of animal life in vastly different forms came close to swamping Rico’s self-control. Any moment now, Rico might catapult from the shadows again, yowling in rapture at the way animals, humans and the Divine gathered together for the ceremony of the Blessing of the Animals. It was no wonder, really, that Skipper never ordered attendance at the ceremony before this. Was it because Skipper’s leadership sense figured that Rico and his second in command were an item and that Kowalski provided an anchor for Rico’s explosive psyche in a cathedral setting? Kowalski’s respect for his leader rose higher than before. He tightened
his flipper around Rico’s shoulder before answering Private.

“Not that kind. It’s the sort that some call Sloppy Agape.”

“Wot?” Private broke out of his hushed voice and made a service dog growl in his direction from her crouch at her master’s feet.

That disrupted Skipper’s laser beam focus. After giving a threatening look at the canine breaker of the peace, he signaled Shut Up The Blabbermouth, a routine so new as to yet have no number. Kowalski and Rico hustled Private between them to each slap a flipper over the young penguin’s beak. Only Private’s eyes showed his abject apology.

Skipper leaned in, beak-to-beak in a stage whisper. “Agape, Private, is what we birds feel for all our fellow animals without specializing which ones, yes, even the mammals. In a general way, it’s why we commandos do what we do. Before you ask, agape extends to humans, because they’re just big furless monkeys, right? It’s the humans’ Blessing of the Animals on October 4th that sets the mojo on us all. We’re here today for that reason, ¿comprende?”

As Kowalski and Rico warily released him from their grip, Private looked cross-eyed at Skipper’s beak a whisper from his. He shivered a little. Skipper backed away without another word to concentrate on Padre Alfonso’s conclusion. At his sterling example, the team listened hard, as well.

Private remained between Rico and Kowalski, bolstered by their presence even though his attention flickered. When Alfonso intoned from his human point of view that animals ought to be “a help to us, continue to protect and sustain us” and then something about cheeses, Private heard the words clearly in Skipper’s voice. After all was said and done and the team lay in their bunks at day’s end, Private ventured a request into the still night.

Lights out meant get ready for sleep and Skipper admitted to himself that this October 4th proved as peaceful a one as he’d ever experienced. Damn, that had made his day to see Padre Alfonso once more. The sermon by Alfonso from the steps of Chichén Itzá remained in his heart after others faded. One moment of reflection followed another, thoughtfulness this time making him relaxed rather than antsy. He jolted back to duty at a loved voice. Eh, so Private asked for something? “Speak up, young Private. What did you want?”

“I said that I’d quite like a beach trip. I want to see the sea, so to speak.”

“For a special reason?” Any commander worth his halibut probed for underlying unrest among his troops. Was this a simple request or something deeper?

Private patted the place beside him where Skipper had rested every night during their ‘relaxation’ exchange trip to Åland, except for those wrenching nights when Skipper lay injured on his makeshift hospital bed. He came up with a reply in his most innocent voice. “Oh, well, um, don’t you think that we as penguins ought to renew ourselves with the briny? Jump in and swim in deeper waters than our pond? Splish splash and take a bath in — ”

“All right, you’ve sold it enough. We’ll come up with a battle plan tomorrow morning.”

“Not everythin’ is a battle, Skippa.”

“So they tell me. Lights out, all.” Today’s Blessing brought out some feels in Private. Interesting.

“Aye, sir.”

“Yup!”
“Sweet dreams, Skippa.”
Chapter 5

Skipper was in the midst of an alarming dream involving needles when he heard the sound of his own voice as if on a tape recorder. Why the hell was he taping this and why did he feel déjà vu like a timeskip backward to when Kowalski and Rico first began sharing a bunk here in their Central Park Zoo home? He struggled to awaken but the effort was in vain. A disorienting echo effect distorted the auditory dream. He listened because he couldn’t help himself.

“I, I, um, think it’s good for the team that we’re back in New York and in our usual, um, housing situation,” Skipper proclaimed as they all lay improbably awake even with jet lag. It was early in New York City’s evening but later in their erstwhile zoo on Fasta Island in the Ålands, that must be why he couldn’t sleep yes that was it. From one of the bunks above came rustling, an oblong shadow blurring past his bunk and then an ouch as Kowalski fell out of bed. “I said lights out, soldier.”

“Yeah. You did. Sir.” In the dim night lighting, Skipper made out Kowalski sitting dazed on the floor and then from Rico spewed a butterfly net. As Skipper watched, Rico leaned far out and captured his clumsy butterfly. A firm tug on the net and that was all the commander saw of his second in command until the next morning. He supposed they managed to shove themselves into the space designed for one penguin; maybe it was head to toe or Kowalski on top, no it would likely be Rico on his side and Kowalski on his side. After all, Miss Perky had fit previously. She was more slender than Kowalski, though.

Skipper glanced at Miss Perky, who observed the nighttime goings on vacantly. Was it a trick of the dim light or was her smile wider? She didn’t seem to mind her perch atop Private’s trophy fish. The top fins held her in place as she kept watch and never slept. He resolved to have no more thoughts and turned over for sleep. He had nearly managed it when the softest pitter patter of small penguin feet on the ladder alerted him. He knew that step.

”Skippa?”

“What is it?”

“It’s important and, and, private. Can I come in, please?”

Maybe it didn’t matter if this were a dream within a dream within a dream. I don’t need a Spirit Guide to tell me this dream talk is what I need and want, Skipper thought. “Seguro.” He scooted to the inner part of his bunk and then it was Åland all over again, a living, breathing presence next to him whenever he awoke from dreams bad or good.

Private lay close to his commander. “I got to thinkin’ about a guppy.”

“A guppy?”

“Like wot you said.”

“Agape, Private, and what about it?”

“Agape, yeah. Yeah, so um, that’s not wot K’walski and Rico have for the other, righto?”

“Right.”

“It’s more like wot everyone thinks when they hear the word love, righto?”
“Right again.”

“So will this love they have foul up our team?”

“It hasn’t yet.”

The tape recorder model was mostly silent when it recorded, but not when the ambience was close-to-midnight quiet. A hiss continued for one full minute. “Could it?”

“I’m no expert, but I don’t think so, young Private.”

“I’m not so young, Skippa. After my ‘special briefin’ on my first March and even before it, I knew wot’s wot.”

“Er, um, about — ”

“Sex.”

Skipper took a deep breath and plunged into a conversation he supposed had to happen. “That’s a good thing. Just because you lack experience doesn’t mean you lack knowledge and besides, with Kowalski’s Doris fiasco and now him and Rico, well you’re bound to have heard and seen — ”

“I saw you and Kitka, too. It was most enlightenin’.”

“Move over, I’m getting too warm. Er, what now?”

“I said I saw you and Kitka together-together.”

“Oh. Well. So that happened. Yeah, I remember, you told me that you saw us after she stopped visiting and I blew you off, er I mean tried to forget you brought it up, um forget I said that.”

“Why didn’t you feel me watchin’ you? It wasn’t for long because I got uncomfortable — ”

“Thank the Endless Iceberg for that!”

“But anyway, um, why — ”

“Okay, I’ll tell you, Private. It’s like the whole world fades away and all you see is your partner, all you hear is your partner, and if the whole damn zoo got wiped out by a tsunami from Dr. Blowhole’s Evil Whatchamacallit, all you’d think before drowning was I got some before I died.”

“Crikey!”

“Keep your voice down, soldier. Don’t awaken the lovebirds. They need extra rest.” Skipper smiled in the darkness. “Love has not only a sting, but it takes a lot of energy.” Now he felt sleepy. Was it because of the bird beside him, breathing and moving and being innocently adorable? He yawned. “Do you want to stay with me tonight like on Åland a few days ago?” Someone in his head whispered it’s been months since Åland but that couldn’t be.

“Let me think. No. I don’t want to give a false impression.”

“Mmmhmmm, mmkay, ‘sallright — what?”

But Private was gone until he reappeared at dawn exercises in the blink of an eye.

Skipper rolled his own eyes and relaxed more into his dream, or whatever it was. He led his team in
situps, pushups and a slew of jumping jacks. Private’s energy surpassed his own this morning; the youngest team member outdid the blurs that were Kowalski and Rico and even his own commander. Jumping jack after jumping jack, Skipper lost count except he compelled himself to do just one more than Private. What happened was that Skipper’s nostrils started to bleed at the sight of honed muscles jumping and flippers clapping and thighs spreading —

Skipper thought he shouted “Stop!” but an observer would have heard a stifled moan.

Still adrift in the time directly after the return from Åland, another confusing scenario bled through the night along with more quiet footsteps down the ladder as Private made his way into his leader’s bottom bunk. “Bottom,” whispered Private. It sounded like an order.

Skipper groaned. He presented his tail to his dream lover and the stabilizing bite to the back of the neck came as expected while Private humped him with Skipper’s right thigh pressed forward to his recovering chest. When Private slipped in after a few teasing thrusts and slaps, Skipper wondered why he had ever hesitated to allow this. Although this was their usual position, he didn’t come as he generally did at the finish and hoped that it was due to Private’s youth and commando hair trigger reflexes that hurried this time to a premature completion. Private licked his neck as he slid out after a seductive nibble at Skipper’s earhole. Skipper prepared himself for sleep once more. He pushed aside a groping tickle that gave more information than he wanted it to.

“Skippa?” The young penguin must have learned technique from somewhere because he scuttled downward. He dipped his beak into Skipper’s opening after nuzzling the nearby preening gland for enough oil to preen five and two thirds Emperor penguins. “And wot have we here, oooh, it’s ever so ripe and ready, let Private help you.” The beak descended.

Skipper’s hole flowered around the beak’s tip and he moaned despite his yearning for privacy. “Uh huh fine,” he managed as Private pressed gently and then retreated, followed by twenty-three repetitions. “Going to — ” And then the world turned to white shards and it happened like a Fourth of July lower stratosphere sizzler imported from Hangzhou. He felt Private’s beak slither out and then nuzzle elsewhere and pictured the pink tongue cleaning splattered feathers. When a tender preening of the area finished the job, Skipper sighed with pleasure.

“Thaaaaat’s my Skippa. Kiss kiss?” Skipper did, gasping into the other’s beak until Private licked him into complacency. Skipper tasted himself on Private’s tongue, which was a disturbing experience.

“I can’t destroy innocence,” Skipper whispered to the dark as Private snuggled under his flipper. “I can’t.”

“You didn’t, Skippa. Trust me. After our ‘special briefin’, I wanted to match reality with wot I was thinkin’ ever since I turned adult. It’s, it’s like I played at bein’ grown up until then and now I actually am one.” He reached up to smooth the frown away as if he could see it. “I love you, Skippa, and when you want me like I want you, I’m yours.”

“Tomorrow is the Fourth of July. Let’s make fireworks.” A colossal KABOOM! followed a flash of red, white and blue that swallowed the Eastern Seaboard.

Skipper spent some time after the explosion making sure he was awake for good and all. It was a dream fueled by his crush and set in crazy mishmashed time, he supposed, and that was why he had an uncomfortable hardon that faded within minutes. Maybe he did need a refreshing and renewing dip into the Atlantic. After deciding on Little Egg Harbor beach despite the fact of it being in New Jersey, he fell dreamlessly asleep.
Kowalski asked a nearby egret why Little Egg Harbor was named Little Egg Harbor. “It ain’t ’cause our eggs are little, bubbeleh. It’s ’cause this harbor is littler than other Joisey harbors.” The egret sniffed. “Take it from me, penguin, ’cause that’s what you are, right? I mean, I never seen a penguin but I think that’s what you are — ”

“You are correct, my good bird.”

“Call me Bob.”

“And I’m Kowalski.”

“Naw, you’re kidding, right?”

“Wrong.”

“No way! No frackalackin way! There’s a statue of a Pulaski right over there” — Bob pointed a snowy wing to the northwest — “and me and my flock decorate it now and again … oh. Sorry. Heh.”

Kowalski was intrigued. “I never guessed a fellow penguin named Pulaski deserved a statue! What was it for? In what era? Was Pulaski a male or female?”

“Aw, you Noo Yawkers is all the same, yakkity yak with the questions. Did I say statue of a penguin? It’s of a human, booby.”

“Oh. Color me uninterested, Bob. And you might not want to call anyone a booby, especially me. Boobies are not known for their intelligence, but only for their blue feet.”

“No fooling! I thought boobies was soft, or was it perky?” Bob wrinkled his forehead to show great processes of thought. “Now that I come to think of it, boobies are a kind of pillow. Yeah, now that you mention it, it is a dumb thing to call any animal. Except maybe a duck, ’cause of the feathers for a pillow, y’know.”

“Bob, by any chance would you be acquainted with a squirrel named Fred?”

Bob was still mulling over his answer when Kowalski made his escape through the waving oat grass. Rising over the dune, the sun shone pleasantly on a fall morning that promised a day at the beach to remember. Waves sloshed rather than crashed. As Kowalski made his way back to his team from securing a wider perimeter than usual, he counted the waves. He studied each seventh wave. No, there was nothing different about Wave Number Seven, unless … he thought harder. A fair weather day produces swells in groups of twelve to sixteen waves. That number, and because the tallest waves cluster in the middle of the group, provides a basis for the seventh wave is always highest axiom. Kowalski swelled his chest. Another myth busted! It could be the source of an academic paper, if he could read and write. Oh well. Life held many other challenges, and speaking of which …

“Hey, Rico! Where are you haring off to?”

Rico shouted over his shoulder. “Cowabungggga!”

The challenge was set, met and matched as Kowalski shouted back, “Those are some gnarly waves,
Two little penguins in love splashed and surfed like they were born to the water, which of course they were. Private and Skipper lay side by side and watched their teammates flash in and out of sight as they played.

“Two hours to get here on the back bumper of a smelly bus, Private, was this worth it, o qué?” Skipper slurped a morning smoothie, a farewell gift from the lemurs to the penguins. He suspected Ringtail put Maurice up to presenting the smoothies as pay forward for some scheme to shake up the zoo’s peaceful day when annoying commandos were absent. Mort hadn’t been able to hide his giggles, anyway.

“Skippa, it’s a classic beach trip. Thank you.” Skipper half expected a hug or pat, but when that didn’t happen, he chalked it up to Private’s growing maturity. Ever since Åland, the lad was not so much a lad as a penguin in his early prime. Skipper let the remark stand and continued watching the waves. The sea called to him.

“Want another dip? Maybe out to Mystic Island?”

“Not right now. I’m copacidic.” Something about the word mystic penetrated to Private’s soul and he shivered.

“Hee, you’re cute.”

Private regarded his commander steadily. “I am? So are you.”

“Er, uh, I mean the term is copacetic.”

Private turned back to the water. “Oh. Copacetic.”

For four hours, Rico and Kowalski frolicked freely in the furling froth. When they tired and rejoined their team, Rico looked around. “’Kippaaaahhh?”

“He’s off behind the oat grass, Rico, to get rid of some smoothie. Great water today, isn’t it?”


“Noon,” Private said finally.

Kowalski opened a lazy eye to gauge the sun. “And seventeen seconds. Good job.”

“I’ve got somethin’ big to tell Skippa, and I promised myself noon as a deadline.”

Rico cracked open both eyes. “Yu kay?”

“More okay than I’ve ever been, gents.”

Kowalski sat up. “Create your life from the inside out.”

“Dr. Phil, then?”

“Dr. Phil. Whatever it is, I — we — are happy for you, Private.” Rico sat up to encircle his love’s neck and pull him into a cuddle.

“Yah!”
Private sniffled. “Oh you two.” Kowalski drew him closer and swayed the three of them together.

“I f-feel like a Vikin’, all brave and darin’,” Private said into Kowalski’s chest.

Kowalski looked at Rico and pretended to cry. “Our little brother in black and white, Rico, all grown up to be a Viking!”

“Yah boo hoo hoo hoo — ” Rico stopped. “Kippaaahhh hatesem.”

“I don’t think he’s feeling that Norse bee in his Åland bonnet still, but let’s not tell him about the resort called Viking Village And Boardwalk on Fenwick Island. Delaware isn’t ready for a full-scale commando penguin invasion — ”

Skipper moved silently behind them like the superb covert operative he was. “What was that, soldier? Keeping secrets from me about Vikings at large in Our Great Country? Let’s roll!”

“Get him! Ow! All of us together, mates! Ow! Ow! Ow! Flippin’ ouch!”

Even laughing like a hyena subjected to a big whiff of nitrous oxide, Skipper was formidable and held off most of the attack from flat on his back. “I’m kidding! Sheesh! Ow, not the belly, Private!”

Private stopped on a dime. “I — I — don’t say that ever ever ever — ”

“Gotcha! I’m all better, no holds barred.” Skipper administered the worst head feather ruffling in penguin history as Kowalski chased Rico back towards the sea.

Private recovered from the flashback of Kastelholm. “You won’t mind ticklin’, then. I know how — he went for the notch of the throat where black feathers met white — “and where” — now the pits — “and how much.” At last he got to the bottom of things, the soles of the feet.

“S-S-Stop, I give.” Limp as lo mein, Skipper lay at Private’s mercy. Private flopped down beside him in the sand again.

Rico and Kowalski had wandered off someplace together, not that Skipper or Private were surprised. The ocean beckoned with waves aching to be surfed. In fact, there they were now, shooting a curl. Science and Ordnance sure got along better after Åland, mused Skipper, and the weeks Rico and Kowalski spent sleeping in what mattress dealers called a marital bed smoothed out any glitches that the enforced camaraderie would seem to have caused. Now Science and Ordnance shared a bunk in New York City, too, who would have thought it?

Private had shoved away thinking about himself and his commander long enough. He thought hard about how to broach the subject nearest his heart. “Skippa, do you remember my ‘special briefin’ on top of Kastelholm?”

Skipper smoothed his feathers after the teasing tickles had fluffed them beyond fluffy. “Why would I ever forget it?”

“Welllll, it was around the time of your big hurt and you forgot about the ice worms until later — ”

“Nope. I remember all the briefing. What, you have some questions on what we talked about?”

Private lay flat and raised his soles to the bright sun. He spread his flippers and exposed his pits to the sun, too, and enjoyed the sensuality of the moment by opening himself to bright light in places that rarely saw it. A stray thought needed expressing before he got to the down and dirty. “I, I might. Do you think monkfish, you know, enjoy life or do they live like, you know, monks?”
“Monkfish are fish and have a fish’s morality. They’re part of Mama Nature and enjoy what she gave us all to enjoy. They are not capable of doing anything as elevated as living like a holy monk even if they knew what that meant.” Skipper propped himself up on one flipper to regard his secret crush. “Why the question?”

Private took a deep breath and contemplated a lone cloud that threatened to blot out the sun. He brought his flippers over his eyes and introduced his heart’s desire at last. “I don’t fancy bein’ a monk, Skippa.”

“Whaaaat?”

“Um, when you said in the briefin’ that K’walski wanted to be more than friends with Doris, it made me think and well this is the first time I had the brass to bring it up to you that I want to, to be more than friends with you please don’t say no.”

With his eyes still covered, he couldn’t see Skipper’s stunned expression. Several minutes passed and then Private felt his face being uncovered. He mustered up the courage to open his eyes. Skipper looked at odds with himself.

“Soldier, do you realize what you’re saying? Do you know what those words imply? And, why me?”

The cloud drifted away from the sun towards dry land as the afternoon breeze drove it. Private’s words burst forth like a freed ray of sunlight. “You mean more to me than anythin’ else, Skippa. I want to be in your bunk forever.”

Last night’s dream within a dream began to make sense as, in his turn, Skipper freed words he’d thought unlikely to ever say. “Well. I do love you, but this scenario is uh uh er — ”

“Gobsmackin’?”

“I think it is, yeah that’s the right word, guv’na. Give me a moment.”

The cloud drifted farther and farther away as Private clung to it figuratively in hopes it would not be dashed up against the coastal hills to disappear forever.

At last Skipper spoke and his voice took on meaning like Private had heard only a few times before. “You realize that what I would want from you won’t be anything like you’ve ever had? Do you understand that I don’t allow anything needle-shaped coming anywhere near me?” He swallowed hard. “I’m just made that way. I thought awhile back that my fear had gotten better with time, but it hasn’t. I don’t know if it ever will.”

“I know you’ll always top, Skippa, if that’s wot you mean. I’m not afraid.”

“I might be. It’s not anything I’ve ever done before.”

“Wot? With all your Chinstrap Sisters and Violas and Dorises and Kitkas — hang on, I saw you with Kitka — and a gazillion others that none of us know about on those solo missions — ”

Now Skipper tracked the movement of the errant cloud, too. It had reached the area of the warmed hills where uneven updrafts shifted it this way and that. The naive words sank in and he frowned. “Solo missions away from my regular team are work, Private, so I don’t know what you are insinuating here. They’re always on a tight schedule to coordinate with other operatives that I’ve generally never met before and it takes getting used to another penguin’s working style for optimum success — ” He stopped as he saw that this information whooshed over Private’s head. Very well,
personal talk it would be. The cloud sheered various directions as if it were a kite on an unsteady
string. “I mean with another male. I’ve been sheltered in some ways.”

Private snorted as he propped himself up on an elbow, too. “You? Sheltered? Wot about your Kyoto
story with the douchemarks on the bed — ”

“That’s deutschmarks and they don’t use them anymore and no, it’s another time that I came close
to being raped but escaped.” The commander shrugged, a difficult task lying on his side but he
managed it. “Manfredi knew the truth when he saw me drugged and spreadeagled yet still, um,
intact. He and Johnson saved me from Gacy’s advances while the rest of you captured his gang that
godawful afternoon. You team deployed Wild Mass Guessing about what happened in that
warehouse and I never corrected you.” His voice got the usual sober tone when discussing Manfredi
and Johnson. “It seems those two knuckleheads didn’t explain, either.”

“Oh, Skippa, I was there but I didn’t know. How hideous.” Private couldn’t find the proper words.
“I’d never — ”

“No, you’re damned right you’d never. You’d ask me to act the victim in some sexy scenario and I’d
say no because I’m built that way no matter who tops who. I don’t like roleplaying or spanking or
dressup or anything, either. I’m just a straight penguin, I guess. Sort of boring. Kitka said so when
she left me.”

“Hmmm, righto, you are a purist, Skippa.” The words clicked. “She left you?”

“She got mad when I said we ought to see other people. Not mad enough to never want to see me
again or kick me out of her nest when I visited her for make up sex, but mad enough to say some
shit. I guess what she said was true enough. I didn’t fight with her about it.”

Private’s dander rose. “She’s got some nerve. Why on earth did you want to see her again after all
that muck?”

“Well. I don’t know what to tell you, Private. We got along most times and the sex was good, so —
”

“Stop talkin’ about sex. Please.”

“You’re a virgin and you can’t understand.”

“And just how do you know that?”

“Huh? Because you’re never out of my sight.”

Private flipped over onto his back. He turned his head to track the cloud, which was now a mere
wisp up against the hills. “I was captured by Dave for some days, if you remember.”

Skipper could hardly choke out his next sentence. “I will track him down and make him bleed if he
did anything or had anything done to you — ”

“Nothin’ like that happened to me then or when you were gone on your solo missions.”

The commander’s breathing returned to normal. “Whether I’m present or not, I trust Kowalski and
Rico to protect all members of our team whenever they need it. That includes me and you and them
and us and don’t confuse the issue.”

Private blushed under his feathers. “Um, I lost track of the issue.”
“Whether or not there should be an us. Whether we should become an item.”

“Whether we should have sex.”

Skipper wrenched himself away to present his back to his subordinate. “Allenby’s lancers! I can’t even speak the words when it comes to you!”

Private spooned against the muscles he yearned to caress and rubbed the point of Skipper’s shoulder. “Sex. S-e-e-x-x-x. See, it’s not that hard.”

“Says you.”

“Ooooh, got a little salute for me already, then? I knew you could do it.” Private spotted Rico and Kowalski’s approach. “Let’s keep this between you and me for the time bein’.”

“I wouldn’t know what to say to them. This might break up the team. We need to think this through.”

Private looked over Skipper’s shoulder and noticed that Kowalski and Rico had their flippers around each other. “I’m thinkin’, Skippa, that you’d not shock them as much as you suppose. But, enough for today.”

Skipper squirmed in the sand. “Thanks to you, I need to think cold shower thoughts.”

“Think of a rough loofah or, or shiverin’ in the shower because K’walski and Rico used up all the hot water. Think of goosepimples or shower curtains with rainbows and puppies on them. Wait, I know how to help.” Private vaulted over Skipper and caught sight of what he’d need to deal with if all turned out to his liking. In the natural course of living together for so long, he’d seen it before many times but never at full staff. “Mmmmm. Nice.” He scooped a pile of wet sand on it.

“Aaaaaaa! What are you doing!” Skipper turned over to his back and covered himself to prevent any more chilling. In a trice, Private buried his leader in wet sand and then frosted him with drier, more powdery sand. Skipper looked like a Dairy Queen vanilla shake with cinnamon sprinkles when he was done.

Kowalski and Rico had parted when they waddled nearer to Skipper and Private. Kowalski stood so as to shade Skipper’s eyes from the sun as his helpless commander stared up at his team. The cloud was nowhere to be seen.

“Having fun, sir?”

“You know I always love the beach who’s got the volleyball I’m up for some volleyball — ”

Private broke in. “He was plottin’ to take out some Scandinavian warriors in Delaware. I set him straight. Always up, that’s him.” From where he stood, Kowalski and Rico couldn’t see his face and so he winked saucily at his leader.

Rico seemed to understand more of the sitch than Kowalski did. “Nao bee lvr not fiter, ‘Kippaaah.”

Skipper shot a look to the youngest penguin that promised more consequences to the wink than Private was sure he could handle. The delicious uncertainty made him tremble. The look descended upon Rico and Private saw the two nodding in secret communication while Kowalski remained oblivious to the subtext. “Maybe,” Skipper allowed. “I’ll think it over. Now get me out of this mini golf sandtrap.” He winked at Private. “With as few strokes as possible.”
While a certain rejuvenated and refreshed penguin team bounced on the back bumper of a bus returning to the Central Park Zoo, Marlene The Otter twirled into a trepidacious triple somersault without even thinking about it. She surfaced and accepted her popcorn treats from the kiddies with a shadow of her usual gusto.

Relishing her first day of Park duty back on the job in some time, Penny did not need to dig deep for a compliment. “Way to go, woohoo!” Penny’s rider ditched her authoritarian reserve to clap loud and long. The policewoman hooked a knee over the pommel of her saddle for a long chat with Alice. The two professionals seemed to know each other.

Alice nodded to something that Penny’s rider asked and the rider slid off her mount to hold the reins loosely. “Why, that’s fantastic, Alice! When?” Marlene heard the officer say and then tuned the two humans out. She called to the trim chestnut horse.

“Hey, Penny. Thanks a bunch.”

“Sure, girl. You got some new moves.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“And the kiddies love you,” Penny pursued. Marlene was a good, solid acquaintance from about a year back. Penny did not know her well, but liked her. She had every reason to believe that Marlene felt the same way.

“That’s nice to hear. Yeah, I guess they do, at that.” Marlene pulled her mood upwards through sheer will, it seemed to Penny. The otter crinkled her whiskers as she lazed about in her pond with slow sweeps of her tail.

“So what’s new?” Penny’s rider may not have been her usual favorite officer, but the absent man’s technique of drawing out answers stood any authority figure in good stead. Penny remained dedicated to upholding the crisp, no-nonsense look of her tack and saddle blanket with NYPD logo emblazoned on it, tastefully of course. Her stablemates and her sister teased her about her attitude, which she took in good humor.

Marlene made a rude noise. “Not a goshdarn thing. Same-o, same-o, ad aspidistra.”

Penny gave Marlene’s comment the good old horse laugh. Marlene joined in after a minute through sheer osmosis, which was Penny’s intent.

“How’s by you, Officer Penny? All healed up?”

Penny snorted. “Yes, indeedy. Swim therapy in a heated pool got all the muscle groups shipshape, as Skipper might say.” Penny flicked an ear in the direction of the penguin pool. “They’re hiding out today, huh?”

“They went someplace and I couldn’t go, er, not that they asked me. Aw yeah, he’d say that. No crime too big or small for the team, you know. Too bad Brick and Cecil ripped off the tubing. The Park could have used it for next year’s Fourth celebration for whatever the kelp reason they used it for in this year’s.” A tad more life crept into Marlene’s tone.

“Skipper and the guys could have nailed those two dimwits to help you. They’re aces.”
Maybe this was the reason she appeared subdued? “And they’re gone so you’re at loose ends? They do add spice to your life, lady.”

“Why’d you say that?”

Oooh, defensive. “Not that you don’t have your own spice — ”

“D’oh! I sure have! I enjoy all kinds of things on my off hours, like … painting. Stargazing. Playing Spanish guitar. Solo air hockey. Nothing to do with any penguin.”

Penny’s rider remounted and Penny danced her front hooves just for fun. “I knew that, well, I didn’t know you had so many hobbies, but I guessed. I like to crochet, myself.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Penny’s discipline never flagged in all her years in service to her City. She ambled away at a nudge of a booted heel. “Right! Later, kid!”

“Later! Stay safe out there!”

Alice leaned against the bricks of Marlene’s habitat. “What were you two talking about?”

Marlene’s eyes grew round. No way could Alice have understood any animal conversation. The otter dove to the bottom of her pond and when she resurfaced after six minutes, Alice stood in the same spot. “I’m looking at you because the penguins took a day off to be lazy inside their island shack, bozo. Don’t try any funny business like jumping on my face again. I’m onto your tricks.” Sour faced as usual, whatever good news Alice shared with her officer friend did not extend to making her like animals or her job any better. “I’ve got big important stuff coming up these next few months, and I don’t need you to spoil my days here in Zoo-o Paradise-o. Word to the wise, sister.”

Marlene trembled as much as she had facing Kuchikukan, Destroyer of Worlds, and this time there was no Kowalski to comfort her with a bracing flipper. When Alice’s icy green eyes glared a final warning before the zookeeper stomped away, Marlene decided to wait for the penguins’ return in their HQ. She raced through the underground conduit that connected otter and penguin waterways, the extra adrenaline powering every stroke. Up up up the ladder she climbed to the grate that lay flush to the floor of the short curved hallway leading to their privacy door. She entered the lair, bolting the latch behind her. Just once, Julien would be stymied if he tried to raid the fridge … uh oh. Too late.

The lemurs had pranked again.

Miss Perky “stood” near the bunks, one arm draped across her eyes, head thrown back, left permanently arched foot pointed to the side, her other arm outstretched as if begging the world to behold her role as Discarded Lover. Marlene recognized Julien’s Royal Tragedy pose.

Now this was just wrong. Rico and Kowalski hurt nobody — no live body — in their newfound love. She’d heard Miss Perky’s story from Rico’s beak as much as he was able, and Kowalski filled in the rest one sultry afternoon.

“Xochi was her name. She traveled Guatemala in a ballet troupe undercover for our Big Boss and because she could only sign and not speak, sleazy types forgot she could hear. The scum discussed plans for burglaries and such in night spots in her presence where she freelanced after performances as a bartender. We met her in Quetzaltenango where she and Rico hooked up faster than an Adélie penguin can hop rocks, which was ironic because she was an Adélie penguin.”
“‘Ski, tell me what she looks like, ’cause I’ve never met one.”

“Why did you call me that?”

“Just for fun! And it sounds like winter and icebergs and penguins and snow, no? You do things for fun, don’t you, m’man?” She hadn’t meant to sound so doubting, but hey, maybe he did not do fun. Come to think of it, he had not shown much of a fun side. Ever. Skipper had at least tried to have fun on Fun Day.

“Science is fun for me.” Kowalski thought some more. “Rico is fun.”

“That’s sweet, and and, yeah. It’s sweet.”

“I meant it to be a fact, sweet or not, but never mind. Getting back to Adélie penguins, let’s just say that if we four were not the handsome sort of penguins we are, we would choose to be Adélie penguins. They are beautiful, with black heads, black beaks and white undersides to their flippers. The species has bold white-ringed eyes and rosy pink pretty parts, or so Rico confided in me — ”

“Yeah, okay, that’s enough. They’re beautiful. Go on with Xochi, puh-lease. Enough with the science, sheesh.” Marlene fanned herself. “She sounds like a brave gal.”

“Yes. Very gallant, she was.”

Rico, Skipper and Private raced each other underwater around their island, so it would be about eighteen minutes before they surfaced. Marlene looked both sympathetic and curious as she leaned up from her relaxed pose against her beach chair. “I’m sensing an unhappy ending, ‘Ski.”

‘Ski looked down at the curly straw spiraling up from his drink. “Well, you would, wouldn’t you, because where is Xochi now? She and Rico enjoyed a hot and heavy romance until one sleazo broke her cover … and killed her.”
Kowalski sipped his purple drink thoughtfully. “It was horrible. Our Big Boss blamed herself, called in all her operatives in similar sitches and never was the same afterwards.”

“Oh no. Poor Rico! Poor Xochi!” The sultry day cloyed Marlene’s face and she swiped a paw over her eyes. “Did you catch whoever — ”

“We never did. We completed our mission, thanks to Manfredi and Johnson, and came back to our HQ here that we hadn’t even kitted out yet with our tails between our — oh you know what I mean.”

Three black blobs trailing bubbles raced by Marlene’s and Kowalski’s lie out spot. She couldn’t tell which one was Rico. “Manfredi and Johnson … disappeared … before I got here at the zoo. They must have been quite the pair.”

Kowalski’s chuckle was subdued. “Manfredi planted his big feet right in Rico’s path a few weeks after Xochi passed and gave him Miss Perky brand new in a box. Johnson stood beside him and admitted that he, Johnson, could never have taken the bad news so well as Rico. Manfredi was the cute one as Skipper always maintains. Johnson was wilder and a bloody pillock, as Private says, about his various loves. I couldn’t keep track of them all even with a flowchart.”

Marlene swirled her straw. “More loves than Skipper?”

“Obviously. They were waaaaay seasoned above us four and played all over the globe, at least the part that has penguins. From Capetown to Galapagos, love ’em and leave ’em, that motto served them well — why do you look like that? They were never mean about it.”

Marlene had to think without judging and she sometimes had trouble with that. “I can’t say they were, I can’t say they weren’t. But back to Rico — ”

Kowalski warmed to one of his favorite subjects for conversation. “Rico keeps bits of Xochi with him still, like her old tutu and when he favors sleeping on his belly b-because it feels like his bed is giving him a hug from her on the Endless Iceberg across the Eternally Foggy Sea.” He cleared his throat. “I admire Rico for giving up his original Miss Perky to the little girl who lost her dolly. I don’t think I, I — couldn’t have — wouldn’t have given up Doris like that.”

Now this was LaLaLand, or it was Kowalski pulling her leg to prove he was a Fun Guy. “Doris is a dolphin and the little girl is human, ‘Ski, and that is so not likely — ”

“Experiment and control, Marlene! Basic science! Rico was the control in that hypothetical scenario and I was the experiment! I ought to have given up Doris if needed. I couldn’t do it, I’m certain of it.” He slumped and placed his unfinished drink on the cement faux floe of the penguin island. His brow dipped low. Marlene had to be the grownup in the, um, habitat.

“Yeah, reality check here, ‘Ski, if you are the test tube overflowing with oozy green goo and Rico is the stable green goo, that’s — not right. Rico is — ”

Kowalski’s eyes turned dangerous. “Is what?”

Uh oh, dising someone’s love had gotten her in trouble before back in her Internet Scandal days. “Is a big bundle of precious” — Kowalski came off high alert — “aaaaand let’s get back to Manfredi’s big feet, go on — ”
Kowalski muttered, “Miss Perky can’t die like Xochi did, so Manfredi and Johnson were smart to give her to him in the state he was in. Their strategy worked with the ingenious tactic of a plastic lovey.” He looked away at the black blobs making another circuit that had to end their race in a minute or so. “They were … gone … before we even constructed their bunks. I miss them. They were smart in ways I am not.”

“I understand about Miss Perky now,” Marlene said in a small voice.

With a shudder, Marlene quashed her reminiscences, undid Miss Perky’s hurtful pose and tossed her atop Private’s trophy fish where she perched in solitary splendor these days. Miss Perky fell. Marlene tried again but it was no good, she would need to scramble up there. Very well, a leap with Miss Perky over her shoulder was awkward but anything for friendship remained her personal motto. “Come on, lady, straddle the fin like me” — Marlene wrestled the plastic dethroned lovey to shove the stiff legs on either side of the big fish. “There you go — aaaaaah!”

The fish plaque affixed to the door to the evac tunnel slammed open and then rebounded as one little penguin waddled into the HQ. Marlene and Miss Perky tumbled ungracefully onto the floor with a screeunch from one and a huhoomph from the other. “Wot a smashin’ day out, Skippa — intruder alert!” “Backup is right behind you, Private! Rico, bazooka pronto!”
Chapter 9

Frances Alberta prepared for her trip to Howe Caverns more easily than she had ever prepared for any other trip. How convenient to have the near veneration of someone like Moley, who did what she wanted when she wanted it and who had a boss ride to boot! She slung a change of clothes into a plain backpack; she placed the herbs to please Babalú-Ayé’s sensibilities carefully into the briefcase that used to hold her resumé and Animal Keepers’ Forum’s latest issue. A candle or three, her cigarette lighter, the ritual broom and she’d be finished packing —

The floorboard creaked outside her door and the lock tab turned from vertical to horizontal. “Ms. Alberta, I’m coming in.”

“Just a moment, I’m dressing!” Crap, Jeff was early for the rent. At least she had it all together this time. She scraped the bills in one pile on her sagging bed and counted hastily. Forty-three singles, plus the six twenties and lone fifty, there that was rent for the month. Two hundred for this dump, when she used to pay seven times that for her sweet little Weehawken apartment. She made a face with a curled lip that her mother always claimed would stick that way. The apartment cost her time and effort to keep it clean after she lost her job, and now that she’d thrown away such notions for the easy ways of Santería, she liked her life as much as she had before The Penguin Makeover. She placed the extra thirteen dollars in her jeans pocket and stood up to let him in.

“Why, Ms. Alberta, you going someplace?” Jeff’s heavy brown Oxfords clumped over the threshold. He checked out her place openly, the turd. He likely suspected her of skipping out on the rent and it took all her ori to keep calm.

“Yes, for the weekend. I’ll be back Monday afternoon.”

He held her gaze a beat and then nodded. “Kay, then.” She offered the bills and he took them. “You artistes do all right for yourselves, huh.” He moved his lips as he counted out the amount to himself.

“Receipt, please?” Years of managing a zoo meant she tracked her money, although she’d never been this strapped for cash in her entire life. She beseeched her ori for patience.

Jeff was going to keep her waiting, it seemed. There was literally no place to sit down for any visitor, landlord included. He eyed her seated on her Murphy bed with a tilt of his head and she blanked her expression. No way was she going to move aside to offer him a seat there.

“Sure, Frances.” There was also no way she’d engage in another argument about his overfamiliarity, either. From a grubby shirt pocket came a stubby pencil and slip of paper. He wrote laboriously on it, using the wad of bills in his hand as a desk. “Getting more visitors than last month, eh?” A tongue slickly coated with white crept out the side of his mouth as he concentrated.

“I’m caught up with the rent, so the answer is yes. Performance art is alive and well in the Tri-State area.”

Frances flipped her lavender hair away from her face. Since she indulged her artistic minor gained in college now rather than bureaucratic zoo mumbo jumbo, she felt more free than ever. The Penguin Makeover liberated her life, in a way, although it still left lingering hatred for that busybody penguin with the mad martial arts skills. For a while, she had been bothered by the conflict in the feelings she had for him and what he had done to her, but Santería showed her how multiple feelings bloomed like dandelions in the green front yard of Life and it was wrong to prune them. She slept easier these days.
Jeff’s unlovely face showed a squint to go with the tongue tip as he made the receipt a bajillion times more difficult than necessary. He must have had trouble carrying the two or something, because he crossed out a number and put something else down in its place. “Art like yours, yeah I don’t get it.” He handed her the receipt and now she supposed they’d chitchat because he showed no sign of leaving. “Bella von Guano don’t get it, neither. I caught her spiel on Manhattan’s art galleries and yours was at the bottom of her rec list.”

My stars, the ori was certainly getting a workout today! “It’s cutting edge, Jeff. Metal sculpture and related performance art to demonstrate the meaning of the works.” There, that was enough chatting. “I must catch my bus. Later, okay?” Not if she could help it, at least until the first of next month. He wasn’t through.

“So somebody willed you the empty lot, you filled it with rusty kiddie rides from supermarkets that went bust and other junk? You put on that Miss Cleo accent, call it Funkytown and what you make from Looky Lous is enough to pay rent, buy groceries and such as that there?” The beer belly loomed near her face and she stood to get the gasbag moving out of her domain. She’d paid for it, by Kaiju, for one more mother-loving month. The two of them were close enough for her to smell his B.O. His next question got her goat, and not in a good way. “Even enough to pay Noo Yawk City taxes on it?”

Her ori couldn’t solve every problem. Frances drew on her time of sitting through bureaucratic budget meetings to deliver a smackdown. “So it would seem,” she said frostily. “And in a timely manner, too. Envious?”

The atmosphere cooled in her room, and not the nice sort of cool she felt around Moley. “Running a boarding house that Maw willed me is none of your business.” He looked around again, as if to catch something to gripe about. She’d hidden the hot plate under the folded down Murphy bed and cleaned up the joint. She met him glare for glare.

“Goodbye, Jeff.”

“Yeah, whatever.” She locked the door behind him. It was time to meet Moley. He, at least, did not know the meaning of money because his energy source sprang free as the spirits of Santería, he roamed where he pleased and was a King. When she was in his company, she forgot the need to stay grounded in Jersey life, surpassing the need to eat or drink other than what he provided. What they had was superior to the last time she had been in love, and she wasn’t even in love with this guy. That may have been because he wasn’t fully human, but she didn’t care. Just to be on the safe side, she packed her Maglite and extra batteries. Moley’s eyes may be accustomed to dim light, but hers never would match his. She felt lighthearted as she remembered the joke on the last caving trip, back when she was still Zookeeper Frances Alberta, up and coming reformer of the dying Hoboken Zoo. She even recalled the name on his ranger badge.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve rescued folks who brought no spare D batteries and thought that two hours’ life was plenty on a two hour caving expedition,” lectured Rick Esparza in her mind’s eye. One kid piped up the obvious question and the ranger had swelled his chest. “Why? Because D batteries have a two hour span at full use and if you go in a cave for two hours — ”

“You ought to allow two hours to come out,” Frances said aloud to no one. “Don’t get so entranced with beauty that you forget practicability.” With a sigh, she ditched her stilettos for Reeboks. Some extravagances from her old life remained as comforts; Santería was a most forgiving set of beliefs as long as you did the requisite animal sacrifices. She snugged her shoelaces, pulled down the warm sleeves of her fleeced hoodie and locked the door as she left. The tattered carpet in the hallway muffled her steps.
Jeff’s noxious voice sounded from her neighbor’s room and she made a face at the closed door. Now was when the fun began. Frances almost skipped down the stairs and down to the corner bus stop. From there, yes, she’d need the 168 to head into New York City, but then it was onto the freedom of the open belowground with Moley the moment she descended into Moon Rocket’s secret chamber on the lot that Mom willed her, blocked its floor that was really the ceiling of the airlock, and climbed aboard.

Moley would be waiting.

Life was good again.
Marlene screamed.

"Stand down, men, it's only Marlene." Skipper looked exasperated.

"Wot are you doing here? You could have gotten hurt from our intruder alert system!" Private looked concerned.

"Marlene, you were lucky this time. Rico has a hair trigger bazooka reflex. Think about what you are doing, for Socrates' sake." Kowalski looked stern before turning away to spy what Rico was up to.

Miss Perky had landed in an obscene sprawl. Rico hurried to her side, knocked her legs together and pulled down her skirt. The question why?? percolated through an indignant string of syllables.

Before Marlene could process what exactly had happened, she was the focus of four commandos' intense attention.

"I came here to do you guys a favor --- "

Um. That just slipped out. She did not want to explain fully the mean prank that the lemurs had played. She thought hard after Skipper barked a trademark question.

"How so?"

"Something's weird with Alice!" Ahah, sidestepped neatly, Marlene. You go, girl. She hurried on. "Penny and I were chatting, see, and then Penny trotted off. Alice asked me what we were talking about, don't you think that was weird? I mean, she couldn't have understood us --- "

"Egads! Alice developed Dr. Doolittle syndrome? Did she squeak at you?"

"Huh? Nah, she used human words, Kowalski, but guys, the suspicion on her face scared me. And she looked and smelled --- different --- I can't explain why."

Skipper pondered, scratching the back of his neck. As he lifted his flipper, sand trickled from his pit to be brushed away abstractedly. Oh ho, so they went to the beach. And they couldn't have invited her? Marlene felt her mood shift yet again for the day: somber introspection, chat with a chum, alarm with Alice, fear from a bazooka and now glum plummeting into gloom. She sighed. The only equipment in my playground lately is a mood swing, she thought.

"Has someone cracked the Doolittle Code? Could it have been the Doc? Did it involve needles? Is our whole operation at risk?" The commander looked to his second.

Kowalski dragged his attention from Rico's placement of a companionable flipper around Miss Perky's unrealistic thin waist. "Sir, our world will never be the same if that is so. We need intel and a doomsday scenario. I suggest Level Thirteen as a saferoom."

"The one with no exit besides our elevator? That won't stand, amigo. Whatever happens, I don't see our team as just waiting for humans to discover us. We'd crack up with cabin fever in there."
Kowalski shivered in memory of his bouts with the dread disease. "Option Two on my clipboard is to learn to speak human."

"We'll never have to stoop that low! Not on my watch! Come up with Option Three!"

Marlene couldn't bring herself to join the debate. "I'll be going now. Er, mission accomplished?" She mustered a weak grin. "See ya."

Rico produced a minivac to whisk away the sand. "Bye, 'Eenie."

"Wait, Ms. Otter. Is Penny up to snuff again?"

"Yeah, why?"

"She could be a source of intel. I know she's in tight with her officer pals and could overhear things. Next time you see her, get word to me, okay? We'll keep our earholes open for Alice on our end. Doc is smart and he could have shot Alice full of his mad experimental Doolittle serum to find out about our operation."

Kowalski sensed the need for a lieutenant to rein in paranoia. "But to what purpose?"

"Who knows what goes on in human minds, Kowalski? I don't, and I'm sure I don't want to, either."

Now she was getting bogged down in Skipper's rampant fears. It was too much. "I'm leaving, I'll tell Penny to contact you or I'll contact you to tell her whatever you want to tell her oh I give up. You know what I mean. Goodbye." It took Skipper's tap on her hind foot when she was two thirds up the ladder to give her pause. "What now? I just want to go home."

"Thanks for the intel, Marlene." He stood on the bottom rung and did not remove his flipper from her white foot at her look. "You take care, now."

He was clingy. He didn't want her to leave. That was another weird thing to fill out this day. "Okay, I will. 'Bye."

Private stood at the foot of the ladder, flippers akimbo. "She said goodbye twice, Skippa." He turned away and mumbled, "Must you flirt with everythin' that moves?" Private sounded as if he knew what he wanted and was letting nothing stand in his way.

Marlene roused from her brown study and looked wise. Something had happened today, something related to Skipper's confidential admission of his crush on Private. Private was acting ... possessive? Little Private? She was intrigued. She swung around on the ladder to face outwards as she threaded her elbows through one rung. From this vantage point, she saw four little penguins waiting for what she would do next, and that was an unexpectedly heady sensation.

"Welcome back, guys. You had an interesting day, sounds like." Her head ping ponged between leader and junior member of the team. She froze on the ladder, in limbo whether to go or stay. Sussing out the event might break up her ennui, so she decided to stay and jumped down the ladder to sit on Skipper's bunk. She could tell it was his, even though they switched regularly. There was nothing personal like an abacus or lunacorn in it. He was such a purist.

Skipper couldn't help remembering Kowalski's now it's on me forever and she's gone forever, only the forever part involved a male who was not gone, but who said he wanted to be in his commander's bunk forever. He supposed he had a comical look on his face as he defended himself to a subordinate and he didn't like the image. "I'm only being friendly, Private. Of course I don't want to date everyone."
Ooookay, then. More weird, because Rico and Kowalski busied themselves as far away as possible, doing something or other with the coffee maker and Miss Perky. "Yeah, uh huh, Private, Skipper and I never dated --- "

"Never mind, Skippa and Marlene. I'm out of sorts all of a sudden. Sorry." With a confused look, Private waddled to the refrigerator and spent a long time inventorying its contents, his back to the whole group.

Skipper and Marlene shrugged at each other and when she left for her habitat with a more upbeat attitude, Marlene was proud of herself for not grilling them all to satisfy her curiosity. Five minutes later, when Kowalski and Rico excused themselves to "check specs for Kowalski's upgrade to more legroom in the car after a quick dip in our pool," Skipper said yes quickly without asking why Rico hauled along Miss Perky. The lair settled into quiet, except for Private's slurping at a juice box. Skipper reclined in his bunk for a good long study of the pie charts in What Color Is Your Mojo? but did not turn the page even after many minutes.

A fingernail on Miss Perky's right hand developed a chip in its pink paint from her fall to the cement floor. Kowalski blew on the drying redo of her manicure as she sat on his garage workbench. "She'll be right as any dolly ever gets, Rico, when this dries."

A big thank you kiss from his love followed and things escalated from there after random remarks about desert sand versus beach sand and how both kinds got everywhere. Somehow their foray into Arizona's desert to breach Dr. Blowhole's secret base came into the comparison when shop lights were turned low. Miss Perky sat idly beside Rico as the action progressed to the convenient, comfortable car.

"Rico, do that again --- uh, no lower oh right there, yesyesyes --- " Anyone seeing through the near dark of the garage would light it up with blushes. Kowalski spread his flippers to their utmost atop the seat back and held on for dear life as Rico drove his love as he did his car: fast and recklessly with many changes of gear and speed.

"Keeeeeep ittttt c-c-c-ominggggggg --- " spluttered Kowalski before bowing his head to pierce the dark as if he could see behind them, miles of flat macadam flanked by cactus disappearing into the vanishing point behind the car in his mind's eye. The Superstition Mountains of Arizona with its lost Dutchman's Mine treasures beckoned leagues away --- how long was a league, anyway, his mind meandered --- with the azure desert sky forming a glassy bowl of heat above them. At the moment, nothing was hotter than what was happening in the back seat of a commando team's all purpose vehicle. The real world slipped away as they approached maximum velocity and they did not even hear their siren when Kowalski jabbed it with his elbow during a particularly rough jolt from his driver.

The garage door slid upward with a screech at the same time as the siren sounded. "In here, Private, I'll show you what drinking is all about and I don't mean juice boxes --- what the hamsteaks? Intruder alert! Second time today! Get behind me, Private!"

"Ahhhhhh! Kwoskii! KABOOM! nudder KABOOM! n-n-n-k kaboo --- muhhhhh --- "

"Oh, Rico -- you nailed it buddy er I mean you nailed me --- "

"Eisenhower's oatmeal! I'm about to nail two somebodies --- "

"Skippa, let's retreat in an ever so manly way and leave them to --- "
Skipper was in an unforgiving mood. "Hey, loverboys! Take it out of the braaping car! You'll mess it up with with well you know --- "

But Kowalski and Rico didn't register anything outside themselves or that Miss Perky had slid to the floorboards in the midst of their passion. When Rico oozed like melted popcorn butter bumfirst to the driver seat and then underneath the steering wheel in sated bliss, he centered down onto her upraised arm. The pointy fingernails on her left hand goosed him and he shot back into the front seat only to bump Kowalski, who was gliding down himself into the driver seat. The scientist had in mind for one of them to sit on the other's lap for cuddling and afterwards to waddle their way home in a leisurely fashion. Dr. Phil always maintained that intimacy needed quiet moments, too.

The ignition key got turned in the resulting bustle of flailing flippers and webbed feet and before they knew it, the bubblegum pink vehicle shot through the door. They both lagged in setting themselves straight in the seats. As their car whizzed by him, Private caught sight of Kowalski bouncing to the passenger side.

"Hang about, don't mow us down!"

"Private, jump starboard!" The commander and the private leaped aside. "Now follow that lovebug!"

Between them both trying to control the car and struggling to overcome the lethargy of love's afterglow, the car remained out of control long enough to get dangerous. It rolled up the plank that Gus had leaned up against the sawhorses ringing the fountain he was repairing. Rico twisted himself around as the car turned the plank into a teeter-totter. A second too late, he slammed on the brakes after the car's front and back right wheels toppled off the plank sideways on the downward teeter. Kowalski screeched as his bottom and the car seat parted company. He fell out and with no purchase on the right side, the brakes had little power.

Gravity did its thing and the car slithered further towards the water despite the locked wheels.

"Nonononono!" Rico thought furiously about what to do. Why was his head filled with soupy sludge, well, even more than normal? It took him ages to remember to turn off the ignition. The car stopped sliding. Rico kept his foot jammed onto the brake pedal until he looked behind him. What saved his precious pink baby and his precious Miss Perky from a dunking was three penguins plotzing on the plank with varying expressions as their weight countered the car's. The plank leveled.

Rico scrambled over the seats, brushed through his companions, swung to the ground and grasped the edge of the plank. He swiveled it to suspend the car back over the path and nodded to his friends. They scrambled off the wooden gangway and as Rico used his great strength to lever their sweet wheels slowly to the ground, Skipper took a deep breath to begin reprimanding as everyone figured he would.

"The check engine light better not have flicked on because of these shenanigans, Rico --- "

At the thunderous look on Skipper's face, no one blamed Rico for deliberately letting go the rising plank. It snapped up to knock him under the chin and he fell down, unconscious.

"There, wot a lucky break for our car! Less so for Rico."

"Speak to me, Rico! As much as you're able! Come on, big fella!"

"Bring him to fast, Kowalski. I've got acres of chores for him and for you and that's only the
beginning.” Had the altered relationship status of Kowalski and Rico endangered the team as much as it did their car? Had he been wrong in telling Private there was, ultimately, no damage to the team? If he and Private became a couple, could the sitch worsen?

A bout with ulcers bubbled on the horizon.

IOIOIOIOIO
Chapter 11

"Moley."

"Mmmmsh?"

"Where are we?"

"Whash you call Canada and I call brzdi."

The digger mecha hummed and growled, its whirling blades melding with the earth, finding and splitting fractals in the composition of the soil twenty feet into the earth's crust. Masses compressed, liquids decanted, and the mecha moved forward with a clumsy grace. Moley gestured with a gnarled fist, nearly brushing Frances's tattoo on the back of her hand in his nearsightedness. She smiled, because unlike Jeff's odious male presence, Moley exuded what she called the male principle with no threat whatsoever. His general hunch and lumpy appearance made the lines around her eyes smooth out. "Moley, we've gone too far. I only wanted to visit Howe's Caverns. Why did you shoot the Mrsdm over the border?"

Moley wrung his hands and hummed to himself before answering. His habits grew less annoying the better she knew him, she mused. Another, angstier Frances might have steamed under her breath, but today's Frances stayed mellow, maaaaaan, as her Fake Miss Cleo persona would have purred. During last spring, the inaugural trip had shaken Frances; she feared the dirty underground, scrutinized Moley's cave home and his harem with a jaundiced eye, and kissed the semi-clean sidewalks of Manhattan upon return. Since then, two more trips changed her attitude.

She'd undertaken the first trip after Moley surfaced in her vacant lot. Daydreaming about Funkytown's future development in a haze of cigarette smoke, the Mrsdm shook her off her feet as what resembled a sinkhole opened directly in the middle of the lot. The pack of Luckies tumbled into the hole from her nerveless hand and she never picked one up again.

With wide eyes, she beheld the Mrsdm poke its snout out of the dirt, its paddle leaf shaped blades grinding to a stop. When a hatch on the side opened four feet up from ground level and what looked like a man wearing a heavy overcoat peered at her, she paid attention because the dream of establishing a museum outdoors for used kiddie rides seemed doable with such fantastic inspiration, or maybe it was a vision. She wasn't sure this was real because her stress levels since getting fired remained stratospheric, and she didn't have anything better to do than gauge the brown eyes behind the goggles and trust them. Unemployment lent perks of free time, and no job, no money, plenty of time, and no time, plenty of job, plenty of money as Mom would say. Moley's crook of a finger got her onboard and they were tunneling at thirty miles per hour before she could scream. She cut off her daydream from the past when Moley finally answered her question.
"Tish a mean machine, Frawnces. I like cutting her loose, so you can see what she can do."

Hmmph. Men. They all like to strut, she could almost hear her mother saying from the next world. What was weird was that Frances was 99.9 percent certain that Moley was maybe 85.3 percent human, with who knew what mixed in. There was his impossibly acute vision in darkness, for instance. Her scientific background overrode her new spirituality to eliminate the possibility of species blending through DNA manipulation. Her spirituality drawled that science ain't the whole world, maaaaaaan.

"And I like being in it with you, and, and for its own sake. Brownian motion turns me on."

It took a while to study how the mecha did what it did: the Mrsdm directed Brownian motion into order. Since dirt contained water about the first nine feet down under your feet and deeper if you knew where to look for the water table, the power source that Moley called hmdo and Frances learned was pollucite channeled particles away to the edges of the sub-domain containing the lifegiving liquid. No longer did the particles bounce randomly off the molecules inside a proscribed zone. Given the dimensions and whirling blades laced with pollucite protected from actually touching water by a sheen of energy that Frances considered over her level of scientific expertise, the pocket created was just wide enough for the subterranean vehicle shaped like a rocket kiddie ride from the 1950s to slither down, sideways, or up. Even granite had cracks large enough for movement of the eleven foot wide and fourteen foot long traveler, while friable sandstone was a dream to maneuver in. The closed pocket with the bouncing, bounding and pronking particles circumscribed in their controlled movement operated at thermal equilibrium, which in New York state's caves and caverns hovered at 52 degrees Fahrenheit.

Frances admired the mecha and the rambling kingdom of Moley. Her forays with him eventually translated dirt into a realm for her to oversee. When Santeria practitioners surrounded her in the urban wilds of New Jersey at her new residence in the aboveground world, she slid into a gentler set of beliefs, except for the animal sacrifices; she was a rare thin woman in her group of mostly stout females. When the idea came to crystallize herself into an actress in the mold of the late Miss Cleo, it was easy peasy to adopt the voice and style of her new performing persona. She drew the line at offering tarot readings, though. The other abilities she was learning from the ancient religion were strange enough.

"How does it turn you on? Do you have a switch somewhere on your body?"

"You never will see me naked enough to find my switch, Moley. I'm not into you that way. It's an expression --- oh, skip it. I like random motion and unplanned things, but for today, I need to meet my pushers back in Manhattan." She had grown accustomed to estimating time underground. "It'll take fourteen hours to return."

"The one called Brick, yes, him I like. The other one, no."

"I need copper tubing that they stole for the metal sculptures I'm building as a new attraction and you, my Mole Man, know where to find copper raw --- "
She thought Moley's eyes lit up behind his goggles. "I shower you with this mineral, my \textit{drzhp}."

"--- but it's milled tubing that I can work with. If I wanted raw minerals, I'd come to you first, you know that."

Moley busied himself with the controls until Frances felt a sway sideways as they reversed course. He kept quiet so long that Frances thought he was offended. "Moley, don't pout."

"Not."

"Yes, you are."

"Not."

"This is circular, Moley. I do like you."

More quiet. "I want to \textit{shzbsh} you," he said finally.

"Don't. You have your harem, why isn't that enough?"

"Whash?"

"What?"

"Whash do you think \textit{shzbsh} means, Frawnces?"

"It means mate, right?"

He made that sound she thought was subsonic. She felt it in her chest, like when elephants rumbled to communicate with other elephants miles away via the savannah's parched plains. "It means live with. I not live with my harem, I just visit them for --- "

"Okay, I understand now. They're on call when \textit{you're} ready."

Moley sounded puzzled. "Naturally. Your Jersey men are different?"

"My Jersey men don't exist."
"You must be on fire!"

"Moley, leave it. Let's enjoy this ride back together like civilized people." She peered out the thick window. "I see silver in the quartz, pretty, isn't it?"

Moley petted her lavender hair with his free hand until she leaned away. "I see rose quartz. Pretty."

"Brick, what did I just tell you?"

"I wasn't picking my nose! It itched!"

"That's beside the point. Look, you get performance art stuff and I, unbelievable as it seems, do not. Lay some interp on me about this piece before Frances gets here." Cecil pointed to a racing horse with a sturdy pole impaling its belly. The nicks and scratches on the metal steed and its pedestal lent an air of past glory. He shook its coin box to scarf any coins, but nothing clinked inside. "Do you think she'll be Miss Cleo again or her real self?"

"Who's Miss Cleo?"

Cecil sighed and tugged his ponytail. "Never mind. Think hard as you can and tell me what to tell her about it." He kicked at the rolls of copper tubing at their feet and looked around. The few passersby on the sidewalk remained locked in their own concerns, ignoring the mecha museum composed with artful seediness. Why, the place wasn't even paved. Giant broad leafed weeds from last summer's rains reached to Brick's thigh and dandelions nodded in a gentle autumn breeze off the East River. When folks had leisure and disposable funds, paths led the curious from one kiddie ride to the next; in wintertime visitors trod over the mud on rubber mats in violent hues. Frances popped up at the most popular attractions to do her spiel. Some visitors swore afterwards that she appeared out of thin air.

Funny, Cecil never thought of Brick as artistic. When they first met at the end of the crime-ridden eighties and Cecil brought up how he'd been near-Olympic level at fencing in college, Brick asked whether the fencing was wood or brick. Cecil had nicknamed his partner in crime Brick, but now Cecil paid attention as Brick explained what went on in his head when he studied the kiddie ride. It wasn't about the horse that Cecil had indicated because Brick's concentration had drifted. Another animal would do just as well.

"See the rusty giraffe with the pole busted off, Cecil, the giraffe means how we should try to see over life's hard parts, like, you know, losing your teeth in a cage fight." Brick smiled and Cecil looked away, past the jagged row of smashed choppers to the Moon Rocket kiddie ride.

"Hellooooot, maaaaans!"
"There she is! How does she do that? She just ups and comes from nowhere!" Frances approached alone, to Cecil's relief. The weirdo she hung out with freaked him no end.

Brick looked serene. "I don't care so long as she buys our loot. Sell the copper, Cecil. That's what you're good at."
On a temperate October noon, Skipper pierced each member of his team with an adamantine shard of regard as they stood at attention to let the lunch of swallowed smelt settle successfully. He rubbed his front as if needing the fish to stop complaining that they were swallowed. "I reported today to the Big Boss about the events of two weeks ago at quitting time on their side of the Big Pond, morning mackerel time on ours. She ordered me to get tougher on discipline."

A muffled squeak may have come from Private, but all kept stony faces.

"I bow and curtsey to her experience and agreed to present the options" --- Skipper stopped pacing directly in front of his lieutenant who stared over his leader's head at the banner that still showed Marty The Zebra --- "that she favored. In the interest of fairness, I include myself in any action that we as a team decide."

Private turned questioning cornflower blue eyes on the penguin sharing his Happy Place since Little Egg Harbor. "Skippa, why does she need to know everythin' personal, I don't think it's her blinkin' business and you said that the team hasn't changed, not really deep down where it counts --- "

"Opinion noted and discarded," Skipper growled. "Of course I didn't report everything. My focus as your commander is to optimize efficiency in protecting this zoo, not in gossiping about who does what to who. I don't give a flying purple braap about that and she doesn't, either. Now shut up and listen."

Private flinched as Rico and Kowalski exchanged sidelong glances at Skipper's harshness to someone they knew he had guarded since babyhood from chilling downpours, adult situations, and his own sharp tongue. With the five cutting words still ringing on their faux floe, perhaps only Kowalski's observant scientific mind noticed two blinks out of sync that were followed by a frown and downward glance from their commander before the voice sounded less like Buck Rockgut's and more like Skipper's own. When the order came to stand at ease, none of the team knew what to expect.

Skipper opened his beak to speak, but Private took advantage of at ease to dart a question. "Why did you wait two honkin' weeks?" There was challenge and no hint of hurt feelings in the tone. It was Skipper's turn to waffle, as much as he was capable of it.

"Um, I had important things to mull over, a strategy to plan, tactics to consider, and it doesn't really matter. Now everyone pay attention." Private crossed his flippers and planted his feet while Kowalski and Rico edged a scosche closer to one another.

"Option Number One: Gentlemen, we could have wrecked our car. Do I have to put saltpeter in our fishcakes?"

"Later, Private. Just know that the glop is something none of us want in any way, shape, or form. I dedicate this power lunch to take on the, er, differences in our team since Åland."

There was rumbling in the ranks. "Not that they're bad differences, just differences to adjust to, more than we
Kowalski stepped one pace forward, drawing attention enough to make his teammates gasp. "I request that Rico's and my shared bunk be upgraded to a SuperKing."

"Granted."

Agog at the simplicity of his success, Kowalski needed a tug from Rico and Private to step back into ranks. Private was next.

"I w-would like, if it isn't too much to ask, to ask, I mean to request, the r-reason wh-why you ordered me to get behind you when our runaway car revved up like Lewis Hamilton's McLaren team racer on Santa Pod Raceway." His voice firmed. "Was it because you think I need protectin'?"

The expected roar did not come. "No, Private. It was because I wanted you at my back for any encounter with an unknown enemy, which at the time Kowalski and Rico were."

Kowalski and Rico joined in, though perhaps they shouldn't have stepped on the moment. "Skipper trusts you to get his six each and every battle, Private. Never doubt that."

"Yah!"

Private fixed his gaze on the banner showing Gloria The Hippo. "Mmmmhhhm."

"So! Changes all around, hey? The good, the bad and the indifferent! So! Anything else, men? Are we ready for a sweet treat at Luigi The Snowcone Man's cart?" Nattering did not suit Skipper. "Oh, heh, yeah, right! Option Number Two from the Big Boss involves you, Kowalski, and you, Rico. It's about rubadubdubium."

"Rubadubdubium, sir?"

"Option Three is from me. What is the name of the stuff that blows up when it mixes with water?"

Kowalski's smile was indulgent. "And we all know how you love sets of three, sir. You meant to say rubidium."

"Thanks, soldier, and for that other thing you said oh hell let's move along. Rubidium. Brief us some more." The Big Boss's true-but-unhelpful observation that her Central Park Zoo team relied too much on Rico did not sit well with the team's commander. When her suggestion involved scouting the environment for explosive ordnance options, he paid attention as he shut away the scenario that somehow, some way Rico would be out of combat and they'd need other ammo sources. He didn't want to think how a Rico-less future would play out.

Kowalski took a deep breath. "Rubidium is the twenty-third most abundant element in the Earth's crust, slightly more common than copper. It's an alkali metal found often in carnallite for commercial purposes with an atomic weight of --- all right Big Guy, I see you're bored, so think of an element resembling a fuzzy blob of white soan papdi."

"Yummmmbaby!"

"You mean the flaky candy with nuts that melts in your mouth --- Private, drool on your own time --- and is sweeter than the cotton candy Marlene is gaga over --- Rico, save it for after the meeting --- that stuff there?" Skipper wiped his beak. "Sweet dandy candy, now I want some."

"On track, sir, on track! We'll make a run to Bailey's Snackatarium soon! Yes, it's an element that
explodes when it gets wet. Lepidolite and pollucite also contain it but you realize, Skipper, that I've
not actually seen lepidolite or pollucite on any mission. Carnallite, either." He mined a better spin
on the intel since Skipper accommodated his request so readily. "I will keep a lookout for it, however. Its reaction to water generally ignites the hydrogen gas it produces. Rubidium can even
ignite spontaneously in air!"

"Luvvit!"

"Yes, Rico, I knew you would. I'll keep an extra special eye out for it, just for you." The two
shared a fond look.

More than anything, Skipper needed to pound home the basics. "Options noted and accepted
grudgingly about the rubidium. What with Manhattan paved over like chocolate coating on a frozen
banana, shit now I want one of those, it's not likely we'll ever see the stuff." He turned east and
hollered, "Get that, Big Boss? I discussed all the options with them!" He turned back again. "Is
your last disciplinary chore cranked out, Rico and Kowalski?"

"We finished dunging out the elephant pen at dawn, sir. Burt thanked us and Alice's eyes bugged
when she showed up with her shovel with nothing to do there at mid-morning." The team chuckled
as the tension eased. Skipper pursued his back-burner projects.

"Anything weird about Alice per Marlene's intel?"

"She looked nauseous."

"By all that's warmblooded, faced with policing Burt's usual elephant pies, I would, too. Anything
else strange about her?"

Rico answered this time. "Nada, 'Kipppaaaah."

"Puzzling, indeed. Let's keep surveilling her when time permits. I never discount Marlene's intel." Skipper's elbows dropped to his sides. "And now for you, Private."

Private felt the world spin beneath him as he snapped back into attention. "I'm ready, sir!"

Out of nowhere, a kiss landed on his cheek. Private staggered. "W-w-wot just happened?"

"I'm formally asking you out on a date, Private. How about it? Er, I mean, I'd like us to pat the
Petting Zoo bunnies now that they're our friends and have a snowcone afterwards, what do you
say?" The words sounded as divine as anything Private had ever heard, in the egg or out of it.

"Yes! Oh, yes!"

Skipper closed his eyes for a count of three before turning to Rico, who had swayed shoulder to
shoulder with Kowalski. "All right with you two?"

This development took Kowalski's breath away. From the time Momma Duck's brood left the
penguins' care after their last babysitting gig and Skipper blurted about 'my' Private, a germ of
suspicion grew to a crusty pink and red scum in the Petri dish of Kowalski's mental lab. He'd
watched it carefully since that time, not feeding it nutrients because there were no more bits of
evidence to suggest a culture bubbling to full, rich fungus maturity. But today! A date! He
withdrew from speculation to ask Rico's opinion.

Kowalski's partner stood beside him, his head on Kowalski's shoulder and his talented tongue
hanging out as far as it ever could. "Hwarg," offered Rico.
Yes, that was typical of his love to be overwhelmed with feelings when situations roiled with emotions laced with serious consequences. It had been the same way in St. Patrick's Cathedral. Skipper waited patiently for three minutes and then broke out with, "Don't keep me hanging, men. You're on this team, too. Black and white lives matter." The voice rumbled a deeper register, the kind his commander got when addressing Momma Duck as a peer. Commanding, parenting, the two were alike enough in Kowalski's mind to explain the rapport and respect duck and penguin had for each other. Kowalski's own experience with commanding may have been limited, but he got it, he really did. He would pat himself on the back for upping his emotional IQ some other time.

"Well? Kowalski, you first." Of course, their skipper perceived that Rico imploded with the revelation that his little brother and his leader planned an actual date. The fallout from the kaboom must rival 9/11’s Ground Zero dirt pile in the explosive expert's psyche. Still, Rico was not flummoxed into a faint and must have guessed something was up. Kowalski would ask later, when they were in bed.

"Grkhrk," attempted Rico.

"Yeah, that's not helpful, Rico. Kowalski, come on, man." Since they all knew each other so well, if he said no way José would Skipper actually halt the date, if not the feelings? Would Private? He studied Skipper as much as he had the imaginary Petri dish. A hopeful gleam in his eye, firm, direct, yes that was the skipper he had known for so long. As he watched, Skipper deflated a smidgen to take refuge in bluster as he tapped his chest to signal indigestion. "We're behind schedule for our after lunch workout, gotta keep trim, et cetera et cetera et cetera --- "

Oh Skipper, Kowalski thought, you just don't get it. He took a flipper from each. At a loss for his usual multisyllabic words, he smacked their flippers together and pressed them between his own.

"Here. This is the way it ought to be." He waddled away to start his workout without a backwards look, just like he ignored any explosions behind him in their danger-filled lives. This time, the metaphoric blast effect did not even singe his tailfeathers.

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Maybe penguins couldn't fly, but Private soared above Kitka swooping above Central Park, yet below an A-10C spewing a contrail near the stratosphere. He hardly heard the command to start crunches.

Rico rolled his tongue back into his beak as he operated on auto pilot. Crunch forward, crunch oblique left, crunch oblique right, rinse and repeat.

Skipper burbled exercise counts rather than barked them. The pleasant day wasn't even half over and he felt great! A date! He hadn't had one since Kitka flew the coop! Way to go! Get in shape for whatever the date brings! Yeah, baby! You're in the groove! You've got fearless moxie and because of that you've got Private!

Kowalski launched into Crunch #34 before his mind slipped from neutral back into first gear. Passages, changes, permanent scary stuff that ends status quo for individuals and teams alike. Crunch #35 did not happen for some time as he lay flat on his back, staring up at the sky. Skipper and Private as a couple? Now don't project, Kowalski, he chided himself; they were not a pair at the moment. He and Rico formed one solid relationship and that was enough to challenge any team. If the leader and the youngest team member had enough feelings for each other to out them to himself and Rico, could that inspire a certain scientist to move along to the next logical plateau in his own relationship?

He snorted as he spotted a flock of ducks angled in a vee towards Central Park's smaller pond.
Without half thinking about it, he picked out Momma Duck's outline. She had no problem conceiving a solution to how do I contribute to the gene pool by, um, conceiving a clutch of eggs that hatched into the ducklings that Private swooned over. He had made Jiggles followed by numerous Jigglei in his lab, so why couldn't his brain conceive a way to continue the penguin species via two males? It was possible! It had to be! He could make it happen, but how? His mind failed to sprout idea seeds that might blossom into options. He fell into a funk as the ducks quacked to each other to stay in a group to their targeted pond. When their quacks halted suddenly, he roused and looked up.

Ah, crud.

A falcon plunged into the flock, talons outstretched in its dive. It carried one duck earthward before leveling out to head towards Hallett Nature Sanctuary. The luckless duck struggled in the grip, pecking with all its might to escape a gruesome death. The distance proved too much to discern the identity of either falcon or duck. Kowalski's teammates grunted as they neared the end of the set of crunches and missed the whole drama.

Kowalski was shaken. Life could end at the snap of a nonexistent penguin finger. By hook or by crook, he would determine a way to make Life the victor. He turned his head away from the distressing sight and regarded Rico.

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Chapter 13

"Relaax, maaan. Let it flow easy into your gut, like mornin' caaaaffee and beercan and aiggs."
Frances assessed the fifty year-old bus driver who had just gotten off duty. He patted the mechanical horse's palomino head as his grin widened.

"Heavens to Betsey, it's just like the old one at the A & P forty years ago. I was happy then."

Part of Frances rolled her eyes at the self disclosure, the filthy-animal hating, ambition loving part, the nasty part who had lived underneath Zookeeper Frances’ ultra squeaky clean hide. She observed the man's jacket, which was festooned with merit buttons and 'best driver of 2002' awards. A company man, then. Solid. Dependable. Solvent. Miss Cleo took over. "I'm readin' you like a A & P romance novel, maaaan. You had a happy childhood, yes?"

The driver patted the faded mane. "Aw yeah." He pulled back his hand as the blissful look fled. "Hey, how did you know that?" Typical Manhattan skepticism flavored his words. "You fakin' me out?"

Now that she had faith, it was easier to take his hand and look deeply into his wary face. "Eeeeasy, maaan." His driver's glove was kid leather, soft and supple against her palm. "You collected Matchbox cars as a bye, am I right?" This part was easy. Of course, his age group told her that it was likely he did play with the toy cars as a boy. A guy like this who became a professional driver probably got sentimental at the mere name. Look, his pupils dilated in happiness and his pulse jumped. She squeezed his hand in both of hers, gauging his excitement level as easily as she had read her zoo animals' moods by the way their tails flagged up high or drooped to the dust that she would vacuum away whenever she first noticed it.

"Y-Yeah!" He cleared his throat. "Yes. I had the whole run of 'em, too. I had a little blue case --- "

"I know. It was your pride and jye."

"Right. Then Mom put it out in a yard sale when I turned thirteen."

Frances channeled Miss Cleo's warmth and wisdom. "Leave the past behind and call me now."

"Call?"
"Call me Miss Frances."

"Uh, okay, Miss Frances."

Frances grinned broadly. "Yeah, I see you as a bye. You're standin' behind you. You have a
huuuuge smile over your braces." She stared above the driver's left shoulder fixedly.

The man jumped to look behind and then caught himself. "I-I'm not sure I want you to do that, lady - --"

" --- and the bye is now a man who wants to ride this pony."

He laughed as much as anyone in the crowd did. "Well, sure I do, but not literally."

I've got you, I've got you, thought Frances. "So do it in your soul."

He faltered. "Huh?"

"Clooooose your eyes, climb aboard and ride."

He looked around at the thirty-two faces surrounding him, some slack jawed with wonder, some jeering. He squared his shoulders. "Okay, I'll do it. I can take a joke." He winked at his onlookers. "There's a two drink minimum and a cover charge for all this entertainment, folks!" The crowd warmed to him. His uniform showed an average build at middle age. His belly pouched out as he swung a leg over the motionless metal horse to settle into the saddle; he fit part of his butt into the seat and the rest perched on the cantle. Naturally the proportions of adult-man to child-sized-horse were all wrong, but as Frances wove her spell, she called on Oshosi to guide the man's spirit into simple joys of childhood via the horse. As friendly as Oshosi was with animals, he would look favorably on her wishes. She would work out a payment of sacrifice later; Santeria was most forgiving as to the timing of sacrifices, as long as they were done eventually.

Even the jeering faces evened out into something like acceptance and encouragement as the man braved looking silly. The metal horse's active days were decades behind it and Frances wouldn't have it any other way, because she dealt in dreams discovered and uncovered and not in real-life carnival rides with their mechanical problems and endless maintenance. The man jogged his hips and played as he used to on the immobile horse; he laughed in joy as the crowd joined in to laugh with him and not at him.

Frances allowed ten minutes for the imaginary, restorative ride before ending the dream and shaping reality into what she needed from him. "Golleeeee, gosh. Good glory, Miss Frances, this is great!" Some of the crowd drifted to the next ride on her circuit, a mermaid with an improbable saddle on her back as she swished her tail, or would if she were in working order.

Frances called on Oshosi to magnify her voice to her customers. "Pay at the exit, whatever y'all theeenk it is worth." This one had a steady job and would pay well, she was certain. Years of experience as a zoo official honed her people sense regarding clothing, attitude and willingness to shell out for experiences rather than the goods and services. She turned away from the man in confidence.
Today was a good day. And when it was done, her room awaited her with rest and no Jeff to tiptoe by, because he was working late at the museum tonight for the Boy Scouts sleepover. A quick meal on the hot plate, knock back a cold one and then think how she would pay Oshosi. Some incense would help.

Life itself was good.

At the exit, she expanded her persona to thank each visitor, gather her cash, and close up for the day. A well-dressed lady lingered to speak with her after the other guests departed. The fresh and direct voice spoke with a strong Zimbabwe accent, or perhaps it was Zambian. "Good evening, Miss Frances. I am Akili Wangai-McSlade. I enjoyed your reading. Do you have the time for a chat?"

Just like that, life was not quite as good. Frances elbowed aside Miss Cleo's persona and invoked her ori as she faced her past head on.

"I'm off work."

"A minute, please?"

The lady had charm and she dressed as formally as Frances used to when attending various schmoozing receptions. Frances was guarded.

"Very well."

As the crowd dispersed, Frances appraised the lady. Of course, she knew from the newspapers that McSlade married Wangai right before he visited Hoboken Zoo on that never to be forgotten day, which flipped her life end over end. No more relatively-high living, no more apartment, no more stilettos: the differences did not end there. For a moment, she saw red. McSlade fired her after her stellar performance, all because she scrubbed the zoo to perfection in both its habitats and their, um, inhabitants. Bio-Android animal replacements had been her cleaning tool of choice, well, the Commissioner didn't agree. An obnoxious animal in the shape of a penguin had been the instrument of her downfall.

Akili's face turned serious. "You know who I am, so let us not beat about the bush. Pervis can be impetuous, can he not?" The bemused half-smile was that of the newly married and indulgent spouse. It carried hints of off-duty portly Commissioners and possible dalliances with trim dark-skinned wives that Frances avoided thinking about.

Frances didn't bother hiding her frown. "What do you want from me?"

No chitchat, because life had changed her and she went with the flow as Santeria proposed. This meeting was only a ripple on a backwash of the river of Life.
Akili appraised Frances, too. "Your hair is the bright color of a little green bee eater from my country. I like it." She unbent a trifle. "I am a veldt specialist from Lusaka. Pervis and I met when he was on sabbatical from uni and years passed before we met again. It was magical!"

Okay, she was from Zambia, for sure, but gads, talking about hair and clothes and relationships, how girly could you get? "I am familiar with the species of bird."

Akili didn't miss a beat. "Then you know they remove the sting from the bee before ingesting it by hitting the insect against a hard surface again and again. I think you have been hit, Miss Frances. I offer a better life than perhaps making this" --- she gestured with a white-gloved hand at the rusting metal exhibits atop plain dirt in Frances' legacy from her mother --- "your permanent pozzie. Pervis says you have organizational expertise that should not be wasted, even though you cocked up --- oh, Akili, you chop. You know what I mean, Ms. Alberta."

A secret fear was that she would fail one day to make the rent on her room and Jeff would not hesitate to ditch her and her belongings into the street after fourteen days. Frances grit her teeth before replying. "That's nice of you. Tell the Commissioner I decline. I am doing well enough, Mrs. McSlade."

"Wangai-McSlade."

"Sure." Frances considered one-upping as she used to do often in board meetings. "Do you offer an apology?"

Akili lowered her gaze. "I do not. I agree with Pervis about the termination because animals are no dirtier than we humans are. If you wish to continue making only a living wage entertaining the gullible, that is your affair."

The offer had been kindly enough, even if Akili rubbed her the wrong way in her neat hairdo and natural fibers suit. Frances took the high ground. "I thank you and possibly him all the same. I am healthy, happy, and paying the bills, so what else matters?"

"As you wish." Frances blinked as she tried to remember where she had heard that phrase before.

The woman withdrew gracefully, but stumbled a little in her Gucci pumps over the pile of cut copper tubing by the exit. The tubing lengths awaited further shaping into Frances' latest project of "something regarding kiddies," she wasn't sure what it would be yet. As she donned her jacket and patted the coins and bills in its pocket, Frances headed home to seek inspiration from Oshosi and possibly Yemoja.
"So the Petting Zoo has dwarf fainting goats now? Why wasn't this on my morning report?"

The three billy goats wrenched their attention away from the lone nanny. "Boys, we got ourselves a busybody," said the one middling in size. "Remember what we did to the last busybody we met?"

Two heads lowered. Two hooves stamped. Two upright tails whipped in the evening breeze like car antenna trinkets that Jack-In-The-Box restaurants didn't hand out any longer. "We give 'em the treatment, right, Chark?" they chorused.

The middling one sized up the newcomers. His charcoal coat afforded effective camouflage in the dark paddock that housed Randy The Sheep and The Three Were-Bunnies, as Skipper privately termed the bunnies with ferocious MMA skills. Randy snoozed, but the bunnies foraged among the grass of the far west end. At this part of the zoo, lighting only rimmed the paddock with little effect in its middle and on a moonless night such as tonight, penguin darkness vision came into play.

Private snickered, already high spirited because of being on an Official Date. "You do realize your horns have been sawed off?"

It was up to Skipper to defuse the situation and he stepped up to the plate. "Now hold on, Belligerent Caprines. You don't know the lay of the zoo land yet - "

" - and you're the head honcho around here? Who says?" Chark stiffened and then relaxed. "We're fixing to take over this Petting Zoo. We did it in Nashville and we'll do it here, Yanks."

An unholy shriek issued from one of the two goats as they edged nearer to the two penguins. Private moved to stand back to back with Skipper. "Some first date," he muttered out the side of his beak.

"I'll make it better, Private. I promise."

"It's not your fault, I didn't mean - "

"Watch out, here come the bunnies!" Skipper shouted. He and Private dove one to each side of Chark as Fluffer, Nutter and William bounded up to the group. They sat respectfully to the side, their combat abilities muted to the penguins and likely invisible to the goats.

"Hewwo," said Fluffer. He licked a paw and groomed his ears. "Skippeh and Pwivate, good to see you. And you goats, too. We haven't been pwopewwy intwoduced." He stuck out his dry paw. "I'm Fwuffeh, this is Nutteh and this is Wiwwiam." The bunnies nodded in perfect politeness.
Chark looked at the offered limb without moving to complete the greeting. He peered towards the nanny goat who was absorbed in bedding down her two kids whom she would join in slumber. "Better stay away from the scrimmage, bunny. It'll rip off your fur." The other two billies cackled.

Skipper tried again. "Like I said, you goats don't know the standing orders around here - "

"Orders? By you? I don't take orders from any animal, bird. Now if you was a spider monkey, I might consider it. I might." Chark's potbelly bloated even more with his tough words.

Private firmed his stance, back stiff and flippers in attack position. All fond notions fled of chatting up the soft bunnies and scratching the places that they couldn't reach. Battle mode again, he thought. And I want love tonight. Pinfedderers!

"Take a chill pill, goats. There's more than just the two of us to keep the peace." All right, Skipper, negotiating to find common ground is a proven strategy, so employ the tactic you know. "We'll braid your lips in ten seconds flat if you don't calm down." There. Threats were standard operating procedure in negotiating, right? He needed a refresher course. Damn, he'd wanted love tonight and the mood was spoilt. He glowered at the three gruff billy goats.

Chark displayed even more ire as he tried to steal home. "Get off our turf! It's triple filtered fescue and we don't want you on it!"

Damn again. Private and he had no luck in love tonight because these three ornery critters were loaded for bear. Skipper dropped negotiating as a strategy. Routine One it was to be: Kick 'Em In The Crotch. He glanced at the target area. Er, what the flank steaks? Where were the targets? They couldn't have been - oh hell. The goats had been gelded. No wonder they overcompensated for what they were missing! Pity colored his opinion of the poor guys.

Private noticed the sitch, too. "Skippa, they're - "

"Don't say it, scrawny bird," blatted one of the goats. "We got balls where it counts."

Fluffer, Nutter and William burst into tenderhearted tears. "Aw aw aw n-n-noooooo, s-say it isn't sooo, poah unnatuwal g-g-goaties - "

The paddock atmosphere charged with a foul blended stench of upcoming battle and overwhelming pity. Chark swept his head down while his beard swung like a bell. The other two joined him, pawing the ground as if the paddock were the Plaza de Toros and bleating strange noises that resembled humans hollering in great distress. "We're wethers and proud of it! Go Rocky Top!" came their battle cry.

"Private, Modified Routine One!"
"I'm on it, Skippa!"

The bunnies' sobbing increased to heartrending proportions.

Chark and the others charged two steps, Skipper and Private touched tails as they backed into each other and William fainted. He was not the only one.

Chark and his buds stiffened, eyes protruding. They fell onto their sides.

"They awe dead, dead, deeeeedad!" cried Fluffer. "Poah, poah unnatuwal goaties!" He fell on Nutter's breast. The two bunnies clutched each other, inconsolable.

Private came down from battle stance and poked warily at Chark. "They're still breathin'. Will they be all right?" He turned to the bird he loved. "Skippa?"

Skipper's fight or flight response had always been hair trigger. It took him a moment to answer what his brain provided. "They fainted." He willed himself to relax. "We don't need to do anything for or to them, although I'd like to slap them silly for all the trouble they caused. Stupid mammals."

Fluffer and Nutter clustered around William and either ignored the remark or put their friend's welfare before any petty insult. They fanned fresh air into his face and then William sat up groggily. "What just happened?"

"Hey, that's my line!" Private turned his flippers out helplessly. "So they do this all the time?"

"I'll ask Kowalski later, but yeah, I think if they get excited enough it happens. Meeting such penguin manliness blew their circuits."

Fluffer hiccupped. "They awe wascawwy neighboahs. I weawwy, weawwy want them gone." He turned hopeful pink eyes to his penguin friends. "Can you awwange it?"

Nutter and William shrugged. "It's a big Petting Zoo meadow, Fluffer, and there's room for goats, I mean, Randy isn't much nicer than these three are," offered Nutter. "For right now, let's table the request, okay?"

"Listen to your pals, tiny lagomorph. Kowalski messed with the zoo's relocation computer before with mixed results, remember?" The quiet minute lengthened into two as they all remembered.

Private took upon himself the unofficial burden of Morale Officer. "Righto then, gents. Care for a spot of groomin'?" He waved his flippers for effect. "It's ever so soothin'."
The three bunnies glanced at each other before nodding. Their fur succumbed to expert patting as fluffing and a little bit of preening crept in. Twenty calming minutes later, the five sat in a companionable circle to watch the goats recover and stagger away.

Chark looked over his shoulder at them almost out of earshot. "Got off lucky, you did, birds."

"Yeah yeah, sure sure." Skipper felt magnanimous to animals who had suffered such a loss. Even if it were in babyhood, it had to have hurt. He crossed his legs tightly, only to see that Private and the rabbits had done the same. "So, Private, ready for snowcones? Luigi might still be in the park, but if he's gone, there are vending machines over by Alice's office."

Private stood. "I am, Skippa. This date is turnin' out unexpected, but I like it all the same."

Fluffer, Nutter and William looked at each other with wide eyes, but when Fluffer finally gathered the nerve to ask a relevant question, the penguins' commando speed had whisked them into the park proper.

IOIOIOIOIO

"This is nice, Private."

"It is, Skippa."

One stolen snowcone later, Private and Skipper sat under Fred's tree as they licked opposite sides of the cherry snowcone. Skipper thanked his lucky stars that squirrels were daytime creatures and nighttime snoozers. Given his living sitch, privacy always was hard to come by and on a date he desired it even more. If there was no substitute for solitude as he'd always said, there also was no substitute for one on one time. He pushed the flat of his tongue against the base of the snowcone's paper where red met white to make a soppy corona.

"Mmmmmmmmm.

Private's tongue collected the sweet syrup as it ran down the sides of the icy cone. "Yummmmmy, wot?"

"Uh huh."

They finished the treat and looked up through the branches at the autumn constellations. The Ploughman and the Bears danced their neverending dance, Orion swung his bodacious club and the night turned crisp. Penguin shoulders relaxed into the tree trunk and touched. Private looked long at Skipper and Skipper looked long at Private.
"We can't go on like this, Skippa."

Skipper shot into alert mode. "What? Why do you say that? What's wrong?"

Private realized his error. "Sorry! I only meant that we can't go on wonderin' if we're goin' to kiss."

Quick to alert, less quick to relax, Skipper stumbled, "I'm not good on a date when I'm nervous."

"I make you nervous? Me?"

"Yeah, a little, yeah."

Leading came as naturally as breathing, yet on a date like this one, the consequences loomed over Skipper's head like a figurative Kitka bearing down on a helpless pigeon. He was searching for more words when Private took over.

"We're not goin' to feel comfortable until we know where this datin' stuff is leadin' us."

Perfectly said! Skipper could only nod.

"I don't know about you, but the suspense is killin' me."

A few words surfaced. "Let's end the suspense."

Private looked as if he dredged up courage from a spot inside he'd never plumbed. "Let's."

Skipper curled a flipper around Private's neck to pull him in as Private touched Skipper's flank tentatively. Private brushed his beak's tip to Skipper's before laying his head over to his shoulder and opening wide enough to allow a plunge inside. Skipper licked an entrance as Private squeaked and darted his tongue to rasp on top of Skipper's, making him clutch Private's shoulders and bend him backwards. The trunk proved sturdy leverage for a kiss that lengthened until the two broke apart, gasping.

"That was a bloody good kiss!"

"Wasn't it just? I think we both found out something in record time."

"I think so, too!"
Skipper leaned back against the trunk as if poleaxed with relief. "This will work like a million bucks!"

The night became dreamlike. A timeless time descended as two little penguins opened themselves to the stars and to each other without any more physical contact. It wasn't until Fred scratched on the branch outside his hole that the birds roused from the lifechanging night.

"Hey, you two. Good morning, or is it good night? Wait, I can see you plainly, so it's daylight. What are you up to with my tree? Is that carving? Is that a heart? Were you playing cards? Can I play, too?"

Skipper and Private waltzed away from the tree in dawn's early light, flippers entwined and steps sure.
Chapter 15

Colleen never knew when the urge would hit. No, not the urge to mark her territory, because that was a given with all horses. One corner of her stall received all the waste her body could muster, for how else could her stablemates know not to intrude on her space? And if any ignorant human tried to force a colleague into her stall, Colleen was guaranteed a rearing, snorting, bugling display of resistance. The entrance or non-entrance didn't actually matter; it was the display that counted to continue camaraderie among her kind. Cramming horses into unfamiliar surroundings discomfited the horse, the handler, and Nature itself.

Weeks later, Penny would deduce the reason for today's odyssey to Colleen's smothered resentment over her tail bobbing that would have ached from the previous morning's rain. Not only did Penny figure it would have ached for days, but the tail no longer existed to whisk away flies from her, her stablemates' or her sister's hides in friendly fellowship. Bobbed tails went against Nature. Colleen loved Nature more than her sister did. When the urge to wander, to explore, to roam visited, she proved herself sneakier than an orangutan at lipping open her stall's closure. Wild and free, she made it time after time to parts of the park she had never visited: the Hallett Nature Preserve once, where seeing the sad remains of a falcon's kill cured her of visiting it ever again, and the jaunt last weekend to Strawberry Fields Memorial with its delicious flower sidewalk tributes to some musician. Whinnying and sidestepping, she had been driven away from nibbling a rhododendron bouquet by a fellow who others called Mare Dos Santos.

Penny and that nice Mohawk man who rode her sometimes led her back to her stall on that occasion, Penny being a complete noodge about the Code 507 while muttering they'll pull you from their carriage lineup, you wait and see and humans have only so much patience they're not like us animals. Colleen ignored the scolding and smiled benignly at the good intentions. Penny meant well, for a police horse career girl. As a steady puller of tourist carriages day after day, year after year on the same old horse path except for her three maternity leaves, Colleen valued freedom perhaps a scosche more than Penny did.

Today, Central Park Zoo called to her and as she clip clopped through the open service entrance gates, humans shifted out of her way this midmorning fearlessly with no uniformed human in view. Colleen called greetings to her fellow creatures as she toured. How pathetic that they were behind moats and steel bars. They had even less freedom than she did. Her heart thudded in sympathy and she had to stop walking until it ceased pounding unevenly against her ribs.

She perked up when she saw four penguins that Penny had told her about. "Hi!"

The bird with the most rounded tummy returned the greeting. "'Allo there! Welcome to our zoo! Fancy seein' a splashdown routine this fine Halloween?"

Colleen paused. The space program represented the humans' delight in exploring Nature, so she said yes.
Another penguin taller than the first one took charge. She thought the shape of his head and her
driver's top hat had a lot in common. "Way to meet and greet, Private, I dig it. Team, Operation:
Make Waves is a go!" Colleen noticed the penguin's gesture, they all rolled into the water rather
than dove and then the routine began. She strained to see it through blurred vision and shook her
head to clear it. Eh, age was catching up to her and she'd better enjoy her freedom all she could.

Seven humans joined her, shoulder to shoulder in easy friendship. Colleen made horse sounds that
the humans imitated gleefully as the four black and white birds upended and pointed straight down to
their moat's bottom. A suspenseful minute passed before the four shot skyward as one, joined
flippers and fell as skydiving humans did before separating into two pairs and splashing down.

"Cor," giggled the roundest one as he surfaced, "I love that routine, it's a corker, it is. Like it?"

Colleen bobbed her head enough to shake her roached mane. "More! What a treat!"

The penguins smiled and waved cheerily at their audience, but the mood collapsed like an
overcooked soufflé.

"Stupid cart broke down again, I get so much grief from this stupid job. All right, break it up,
zookeeper coming through! Gangway!" A chunky human wearing a uniform nudged aside her
fellow humans, who parted reluctantly. "You! Outta my way!"

Colleen flattened her ears to her skull at the strident voice and tough manner, a sure sign in horses of
displeasure. She reared and if the humans had been complacent with her presence before, they lost it
as she flared her nostrils and snorted. She would not be returned to her stall this soon! Freedom was
worth it, worth more. Maybe Penny understood humans better and wouldn't get so riled at
authoritarian interference, but Colleen was not Penny. Colleen dropped to all fours in a six-bounce
staccato crowhop and then bowed her muzzle to the bricks before throwing her hind hooves to the
sky as she sunfished.

"Runaway! Look out, everyone!" The uniformed human backed off, palms raised. "Whooooaaa,
Nellie! Whooooa, girl! Cool it!"

Too late. Colleen reared to rake her hooves toward the clouds blowing in and danced on her hind
feet. With her bay hide taut over muscles hardened by years of hauling, she resembled the war horse
in the park's statue depicting José Julián Martí four blocks south and one long block west. Certainly
Colleen's emotions rose to the boiling point as much as that other horse's did and she trumpeted to the
sky. A pleasant outing this turned out to be! Whatever next!

What happened next remained a kaleidoscope of blurred images for animals and humans alike to sort
out later: the seven nearest guests turning tail to escape the kerfuffle, four penguins escaping their
captivity lightning-quick to settle onto Colleen's back, Colleen bolting like a scared rabbit for the
service entrance gate and coming to it closed, which didn't stop her from lunging full force at it. The
closure popped as Colleen and her passengers raced through to freedom. Why, how silly of her; she
was running out of breath at this tiny exertion.

Before she knew it, she darted across macadam and towards the confusing scents of both stagnant and fresh water. She broke into a canter that must have shaken her passengers, or maybe it was a running walk gait, ah it didn't matter if she remembered the term or not. Nobody had ridden her in ever so long and the sensation felt weird.

"H-H-Horse! Where are you takin' us?"

Once she got away from the brick walkways and cement curbs, Colleen calmed. A pond promised a drink and a chance to breathe. She trotted towards the pond and answered the question at last. A human couple scattered before her with shouted warnings to each other.

"It's not that you're unwelcome, but what the forage are you doing?" Colleen couldn't see directly behind her to spy on the penguins perched on her back. The penguin in authority climbed toe over toe up her mane to sit between her ears and the other three leaned far to either side so her rearward horse vision could get them in range. "I don't know why you rode along! I'm just out for a stroll!"

The penguin cupped her ear to speak directly into it. "We protect this zoo, equine, and you ran off the rails. You could have hurt a guest back there and we can't allow that." She swiveled her ears forward. The bird's words gave her a chance to think as she slowed to a walk.

This time of day, hours after her dawn wide-awake brightness, was when Colleen's brain wearied of facing anyone, human or animal. Sludgy thoughts, heightened feelings and impulsive notions formed her new reality since about three months back. Penny was worried about her, but she was not worried about herself. Whatever would be, would be. "I could have hurt a human, couldn't I. Hmmm."  

The mushy footing by the pond slowed her pace as much as the hour of day slowed her thoughts. She plodded hock deep into the water, stumbled and stretched down her neck. She felt the birds' weight bobble on her back at her misstep as she grinned around a snatch of watery grass. "How about a swim here in the wild? I'll wait for you and take you back."

Several enthusiastic replies met her ears, or was that the buzzing of insects? Why was she confused about what was going on with her body? She regarded her peaceful surroundings through a halo of wavery black. The bird's reply took her by surprise. "Men, Alice will clomp in here any moment now with backup to gather this odd-toed ungulate. We need to make sure she doesn't wander away. This sitch isn't over yet. Stay frosty."

Colleen heard a chorus of awwwwws and a large Nutz! and then silence as deep as she'd ever experienced swamped her senses. Nary a buzz or animal voice met her ears. How strange was it that the grass lost its taste? She dribbled it into the mud. Hey, her tail stub didn't ache anymore! It would be both fun and soothing to play in the water, get dirty and make the humans fuss over her! How easy peasy to kneel and then splash on her side. She didn't hear penguin warnings or feel the penguin riding her head jump off along with the penguin clinging to the left half of her back. She
rolled into the muck to thrust her nostrils above water with a final burst of strength.

"What the hamsteaks! Watch out, she's collaps--- "

Kowalski shouted to Rico. "Rico, get out from under! Private, she'll squash you! Bail off!"

Skipper and Kowalski slapped the mud to break the short fall and leaped to their feet. "Private! Rico! Sound off *immediatamente*!"

"Skipper, they got trapped under her!"

No more words came forth as the two penguins flailed away mud and swampy water from around the barrel of Colleen's motionless body. Minutes passed that they didn't bother to count, precious minutes' worth of oxygen they breathed and their teammates did not. Skipper called on all his strength and Kowalski thought desperately that Rico must have been knocked out because he spouted no helpful floor jack from his amazing gut. The two flung mud like a combined Elmer, Becky and Stacy to free their friends.

When Kowalski felt a thick thigh, he crowed, "Rico's here!" He pulled as hard as he could before Skipper joined him. One sturdy tug from their combined strength and Rico popped out. They tossed him onto higher, drier ground and sought for a smaller body. Another two minutes passed as agonizingly slow as Skipper's dread at his final test before he passed OCS.

When Private's limp form surfaced, the slack features nearly broke his commander's heart. He and Kowalski lay the two side by side and compressed lungs, cleared airways and pushed legs hard up into bellies to force out water. Three more laboring minutes passed before two sputtering intakes graced their earholes from gasping beaks in retching bodies.

"Close --- so damn close to losing --- "

"Can't --- think about it --- no options left --- *unacceptable* --- "

Kowalski and his skipper drooped over their loves in nervous exhaustion. When Alice ran up to scope out the disaster, the mud stuck the four together in a sodden brown ball and they wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Penguins! Why did it have to be penguins?"

A few guests had run with the zookeeper to see the excitement.
"What the --- where did this horse come from, anyway? Is that a Park carriage horse brand?" Alice plopped beside Colleen and wrestled the mud spattered bay head onto her lap. "You! Call the zoo doc! You! Call 911, yeah I know it's only a horse! No, this is not a Trick!"

Five minutes later, the commander's and his lieutenant's concentration on their comrades remained so intense they did not hear the zoo's truck surge over the East Drive's curb and fishtail through the mud to reach their location.

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Colleen rested easy, her work done. She blinked slowly as the uniformed human with the strong arms and gruff voice held her in a firm grip. The world darkened, yet Colleen's sense of smell remained keen. She sniffed long and deep and what her nose told her opened her blind eyes to perceive beyond mundane sight. I will soon be free, human lady, but you are about to lose your freedom for decades at a time because your job is just beginning, thought Colleen. Her ribs heaved thrice and then no more.

The autumn breeze bore away the spirit of a dutiful animal to the Rainbow Bridge and its crossing proved as simple and natural as Colleen herself.

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"Aw, for cripes' sake, after the trouble you caused, are you done for?" Still and all, Alice sat in the mire holding the horse's head until the emergency vet vehicle beep beeped backwards to the shoreline with an outstretched winch. She relinquished her duty to Doc with a resigned grimace. "I'm all right, Doc, don't fuss. Yeah, I ran cross country like a gillygalloo to keep 'em in sight 'cause I didn't wanna wait till you got the truck going. I got promoted last week from hourly to salary pay, so I guess I gotta give a hundred and ten percent nowadays. Sheesh. Gimme that cage, willya?"

She scooped the four penguins inside a large container.

As Doc pronounced the death and Alice traffic copped away nosey Parkers, Skipper found his voice. "The Grim Reaper on Halloween? Really?"

Kowalski stroked Rico's unconscious face as he stared out the bars of their cage. "It was her time. Heart attack after her runaway, most likely. She looked long in the tooth for a carriage horse."

Skipper leaned his back against the bars as he held Private's flipper. "Then it's a relief we don't have teeth."

"Heh, yeah." The winch hauled half a ton of horseflesh up the truck's ramp. "Yeah."
Aw, there he was again, surfing on a wave of rhapsody, reverie or rumination about lunacorns, rainbows, puppies or kittens. "Take your time to think about where we can go, Private, and if you need more than three days' rest after surviving a near fatal mud wrap in a swampy spa, that can happen, too." Actually, Skipper beached at a Kitka-derived strategy of taking turns planning dates even before asking Private to go out with him. If Private still wibbled about decisions now and then, he was quite a bit improved over the Private of only one year ago. The Winky Factory mission remained a benchmark to cement the team further than ever before: leadership was Skipper's job, with Private supplying the cute to their team.

Before oiling up his beak once more, Skipper prompted, "Ask yourself what would Skipper do? and go from there." From his end, the pre-date preening by a nervous Private left Skipper itching for more action because Private's timid oiling and nibbling drove him crazy yet he didn't want to bust the mood by griping about it. Now it was his turn to drive his love crazy.

Private twitched when Skipper blew heavily on his earhole to tease right before rubbing his cheek against the delicate area and then licking it. "I w-want to do somethin' you and I have never done."

Skipper choked on a small feather before swiping it off his tongue. "Things you and I have never done are the humongous unseen fraction of the iceberg, Private, are you sure you're ready for --- "

"Photo snaps! K'walski, where's the nickel tin?"

Kowalski looked up from his latest hypothesis scribbling, elbows braced atop the clipboard on the table and thoughtful gleam in his eye. Rico stayed intent on polishing his bazooka with suggestive strokes, but the gleam in his eye could be called wicked.

"It's on the bottom most lab shelf between the Love-U-Laser and Trans-Dimensional Toothbrush."

Skittish as the friskiest kid in Nannygoat's brood, Private made to rise and Skipper had to vacate his lap quickly. "Sorry! In a rush, big time!"


Kowalski practically skipped to the lab door and he, Rico and Private disappeared behind it. Private was the only one to emerge, holding the tin and looking behind himself quizzically.

"Well, they're in a rush, too. Is it havin' to do K'walski's latest theory thingy or somethin', then?"
Dear, sweet and naive Private. "Or something. How much in the kitty?"

Private spilled the contents on the table. "Five, ten, fifteen ... three whole dollars and thirty-five cents! We're rich!"

"We sure are. Come on, I'll finish preening you and we can be going. Plotz." Private plotzed on the floor to allow Skipper the use of his lap. A few nuzzles later, their momentum resumed. There was total silence coming from the lab, and Skipper enjoyed the novelty as he oiled, licked and smoothed.

"Almost done," Skipper said as he preened the corner of Private's mouth where teensy feathers nearly unworthy to be called the name rimmed the hard yellow beak. He skirted the temptation to tease his way inside. "Allllllmmmmooosssst --- "

"Good," Private said, his flippers coming to rest on Skipper's thighs. "Because you're startin' to distract me."

Outstanding. "Oh really?" Skipper asked with a straight face. He scooted up on Private's lap just enough to pry out a little groan.

"You're killin' me, Skippa," Private complained even as his touch made its way back to Skipper's tailfeathers, pulling him against him as he let his tongue ghost over Skipper's neck. "I'm a patient penguin --- "

" --- so let me finish," Skipper scolded, elbowing against Private's chest to push him back. As he nibbled the final strokes, Private's flippers wandered, running up the muscled back, slipping through chest feathers and finally playing at the edges of the waist.

Private snickered when his commander doubled up to giggle at the tickle. "Oooooh, thought you fooled me, Skippa? Two can play this game!"

Three gasping minutes later, pits ruffled and head feathers in need of another preening, the two rolled across the floor in Full Metal Ticklefight. "Give! Give!"

"You first!"

"Never!"

They might have spent their entire second date like this, but a sneeze of Private's blasted powerfully enough to stop the tussle.

"Bless you. Damn, I thought Rico swept the floor free of dust yesterday. I might need to discipline -"
A touch to a frowning brow brought Skipper out of officer space. "Not now. Please?"

"Awwww, I won't go soft, ever."

A look that Skipper had never seen bloomed on Private's face. "I should hope not."

"Heh. Um. Let's move out." Skipper addressed the lab's door. "See you later, no need to wait up, aw that's all right, don't let me interrupt --- "

The door opened a trifle and a Rico-type sneeze sounded from within. "Just go already!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Skipper cackled and ushered Private to the ladder. Private bowed with an elaborate flourish before gesturing to Skipper to head topside first. The urgency seemed to have fled and the young penguin looked shy, or was it tired? Eh, this second date ought to go smoother than confronting testy dwarf goats and they could be back before lights out, perhaps. Skipper led the way to the photo booth between Roy's and Burt's habitats.

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Tonight's clouds promised rain in the near future. "Out for your constitutional?" Roy sharpened his horn against his brick habitat wall, alternating sides until the point would appear alluringly dangerous to the looky loo guests tomorrow morning.

"That's classified," responded Skipper by rote. Oh oh, no need to be touchy about dating and arouse suspicion, even though he wanted himself and Private to swim under the zoo sonar for a little while longer. Roy may not be able to sing well enough to join a penguin barbershop quartet, but he could sing in the sense of spreading gossip. "Um, yes, out for a walk to take new photos for our Big Boss to show, um, our current status."


Gah, he was getting loose-beaked in his lovelorn state. He'd never, ever mentioned a Big Boss or any other bit of their command structure to zoomanity; he must be more cautious. "I mean --- "

Roy twisted his neck and rolled his armor plated shoulders. He stuck his long head over the wall, working his square upper lip. "Look, I don't want or need to know about you, buddy boy. Keep on keeping on protecting our zoo home, is what I always say. Just do your job and let me do mine."

"Job?" Private squeaked.
Roy stretched his mobile lips in a wide grin and wiggled his hips. "Runner up for the most photogenic animal, after you, Private, am I right? I'm right."

"Oh, photogenic, riiiiiiight, isn't that riiiiiiight, Skippa?"

"Yes, Private, it is and I'm winking to indicate that. Okay, Roy, hang loose." He and Private each stuck their flippers five inches apart at the correct angles to make the shaka sign before scooping through the booth's curtains. Roy waggled his horn back at them with a knowing grin.

Skipper and Private were already inside the booth and didn't see it.

Skipper let Private trickle in the coins before hustling them both into the photo booth's seat. Foresight demanded he spin the seat to its tallest setting before Private activated the device. Since this was Private's scheme for a date, he endured various background choices on the screen. The young penguin tapped pixelated arrows to disperse Madagascar-type jungle clearings and Manhattan candlelit scenes before deciding on an Atlantis mermaid's castle motif.

Private speared the 'go' arrow. "Smile, Skippa."

"For you? All right, I will."

The first snap went swimmingly, a classic cheek to cheek pose to treasure always. The second of four shots was to be of a chaste peck on the forehead, but Nature intervened with the diva insistence she always displayed. By eight thirty p.m., their second date was over. By six thirty a.m. the following morning after dawn exercises, two somethings had developed and they weren't happy photo snaps.

"Bless you, Private."

"Bless you, Rico."

"Bless you, Rico."

"Bless you, Private."

"Enough with the blessin's! wheeeeeze Kaff! Kaff! Does this mean shroopf our date is left hangin'?"
The photo booth strip of poses showed three concluding snaps of Private's second by second descent into an onslaught of sneezes, which Skipper personally thought was funny but Private didn't. "Short answer? Yes. Chill out, we'll take more snaps when you're better. Get under the covers, you two, don't make me turn a suggestion into an order." Stubborn adherence to their routine prevailed, however, as both Rico and Private snorted and sniffled and said 'it's not too bad.' The four settled into TV watching mode in the chilly morning on a chilly cement floor.

Skipper just knew he had a dippy look on his face as he snuggled close to Private's spine. Damn, I love this little guy. But how do I show it without seeming too soppy? After dawn calisthenics, it was pleasant simply to sit no matter what was on the TV, and allow the alpha waves of the morning juvenile programming to roll over the brain like rollers on Wailea Beach. Skipper rested his chin on Private's shoulder as the TV unleashed its pacifistic message.

The lunacorn known as Prince Sharesalot chirped a tune as Skipper rolled his eyes, which Private couldn't see because the two penguins in love sat spoon fashion in front of their TV. The young penguin leaned forward out of Skipper's loose embrace, quivering with delight as his hero twittered in a decent enough voice, "Come along and sing a song, I will show you how it's strong, To reveal your ev'ry feeling, Even when your heart is reeling! Spill your guts and up you go, To the clouds of Love's Rainbow!" Prince Sharesalot's mouth did not move with the poor animation, but his head wobbled up and down as his feet pranced stiffly, front legs out of sync with the hind legs. Riding on that dying horse's back three days ago was easy compared to riding a lunacorn, Skipper surmised and needed his love's joyous exclamation to carry him out of sudden sobriety.

"Yayyyy! It's their one hundredth episode, Skippa! Did you ever think it would get so popular on TV and even spin off an ice show?" Private did not register that he joined spin with ice show in a poetic fashion, but Skipper noticed and nibbled Private's earhole feathers fondly.

"No, can't say I did." Hmmph, and the network high muckety mucks cancelled Apocalyptic World Road Rage after only six episodes! The outstanding show ended in a cliffhanger that no fan could parse into a logical second season opener, which now would never happen. Figures.

Prince Sharesalot continued his theme of, well, sharing. "Croon your love a song that --- " and then Skipper's patience frayed. He stood as an idea hit him and Private craned his head backwards with a look that made Skipper's heart skip a beat.

"Private, I'm up for us singing and, you know, actively creating rather than just sitting around? We're rested and ready to chirp, right, men?" Two out of sorts faces looked less than frosty and perhaps a bit feverish with the third in a basal state.

Rico and Kowalski hauled themselves to their feet. Rico yawned and Kowalski pushed him back down into a sit, which Rico turned into a sprawl. "He needs to rest, sir, after our date last night --- "

"Halt babble that nobody needs to know!" Tee Em Eye hadn't been a problem before Åland and if he had anything to say about it, it never would. Certain issues needed to remain in shadow, for Mata
Hari's sake. He charged ahead like a beachmaster sea lion herding in his harem. "I have a suggestion" --- he avoided looking at Private --- "that we sing doo-wop alternatively from barbershop for our zoo and make the song, oh I don't know" --- he glanced out the nearest porthole --- "how about Earth Angel?"

"Earth Angel is classic doo-wop, Skipper. We've never attempted doo-wop," said Kowalski evenly. Being the recipient of questioning looks never bothered Skipper before, but it did now, just a trifle. He stifled the feeling and gestured impatiently to one bunk occupied by a lunacorn and one by an abacus. Rico and Private looked their thanks after an official salute and stumbled to their rest with a don't blow your beak too hard from Kowalski.

Skipper regarded the lair's ceiling spikes. "Oh well, if you three are afraid to try something new, I sure can't sing barbershop or doo-wop harmony on my own ---"

This wasn't fooling Kowalski, not really. "Sir, you know us better than that. Of course we'll take a whack at it with a six foot whacking stick. Singing doo-wop Earth Angel could be a tribute to the most splendiferously named group of all times, The Penguins."

"You're kidding, right?" This romantic operation took an unexpected turn and Skipper backpedaled. "I mean, what's the connection?"

Kowalski put on his overweening face of superior knowledge. "The Penguins' 1954 version of the song is an iconic example of doo-wop, sharing honors with In The Still Of The Night by the Five Satins ---"

Skipper put on his it's-not-an-order-but-aw-please-for-me? face that stopped short of begging. "Oh. I just know the song. I leave that extra jibber jabber to you, but hey, dial down the intel, compadre, and promise me you'll sing falsetto." That would stop the infodump, for sure.

Kowalski broke off explaining the history of barbershop vis a vis doo-wop to whine, "Falsetto? But, but I'm a manly baritone!"

"Rico's bass is deep enough for a subwoofer, I sing tenor and Private does that adorable, I mean adequate countertenor. Doo-wop needs a falsetto, so you're it. Bing, bang, bum, done. End of story."


Sass mouth, thought Skipper, but what came out was, "He's gone uptown, you know that. A single accidental Broadway performance on one of our missions and he's handing out business cards to his friends with 'Fully Broadway Trained' on them, or so he says. I can't read, so they could say 'Fully Potty Trained' for all I know. Phil made up the cards and it would be just like a joke that poo flinger would pull on everyone."
The sitch threatened to turn grumpy until Kowalski thought a moment. "Wait, you want to give a performance for the zoo? The week after the week after next week is Thanksgiving. Are you saying you're thankful for ---"

"Ahhahchoozowizzle! Kaff! Kaff!"

"Kaboolitzum! Mrrrrrrrahem. Crikaaffey."

Private and Rico sneezed in unison, too submerged in their colds to involve themselves in the dispute. Skipper directed the conversation into more comfortable levels.

"Ah bup bup bup! Never you mind! We're giving back to the zoo as a team, and yeah, we're thankful for what we've got. So what?"

Kowalski looked wise. "You're thankful for Private? And that all he and Rico suffered after their rollover by a full grown horse was a cold in the head?"

"Um."

Sticky, gooey mush bubbled from Kowalski's heart as it had done with Jiggles and of course Doris in times past. "It's okay to say it, Skipper. I'm thankful for Rico every day of my life."

"Er."

Rico and Private coughed and sniffled from their bunks, honking loud enough to drive the congestion deeper into their earholes despite Kowalski's warnings. Kowalski lowered his voice. "They'll be recovered enough by next week to rehearse, is that what you figured?"

Skipper seized on the chance to display his foresight. "Yup, and as long as you and I don't catch what they've got, we're golden for the All-American holiday talent show on Thanksgiving." He frowned. "It's going to be tough not kissing them for a week, am I right?"

He and Kowalski regarded their loves at their unloveliest: sneezing, kacking and hacking up disgusting bits from their throats to deposit into a tissue. The commander and his second made rueful faces at each other. "Not really," they said together.
Chapter 17

Penny whinneyed loud and long enough to make her rider wonder if Marty The Zebra were still in residence to answer.

"Hey, Penny."

"Hey, Marlene."

Marlene watched Penny's approach from her perch on her waterslide. She dipped a toe idly into the water, noticing its temperature that varied next to zero degrees, not even in summer. Since winter's iciest spells lay some weeks ahead, the running water would not freeze unless the pump broke down. That had only happened once in her time at this zoo and never in her California aquarium. What a pretty pass when I look forward to a break from monotony in the form of a breakdown, she thought, and then brightened for Penny's sake. "What's up?" they said together.

May as well be cheerful, Marlene supposed. "The sky! The stock market! My spirits! Nope, just kidding. Well, um, not too much. I'll tell you, Penny, I feel a leeeetle better than last time we spoke." It felt good to talk to Penny; Shelly skewed too far from center to be confidante material of the female sort while Pinkie's brashness put off more animals than just Marlene. Penny with her comings and goings was safe to talk to, uninvolved in zoo gossip.

"That's something. Good for you to grab some gusto in life. Life isn't all duty. It can't be."

Stiff as starch, Penny always was. This is what civil service careers did to you. "Getting more exercise, are we?"

The chestnut horse butted her chest against the brick wall as her police woman rider sat at ease in the saddle to listen to horsey whickers and otter squeaks. "Yes, I'm in tiptop shape. My Doc okayed galloping last week."

"In every day, in every way, I get better and better," Marlene giggled. A guest threw a piece of popcorn at her and she snapped it up for appearance's sake. Penny's rider greeted Alice as the zookeeper approached and neither saw the infraction against zoo rules.

The non sequitur got a little more interest displayed. "Say what?"

"Some dumb thing Alice chanted last week. I just don't understand her. She's one for the books, not that I can read."

"Yes, indeed." Penny listened to her rider and Alice chinwag a solid minute. "Now they're talking
due dates. Did Alice and my rider return their library books late? That's a Code 10-30." Penny swiveled her ears after shaking her head with a snort.

Her rider patted her neck. "We'll be off to the races sooner than soon, my girly girl. Steady on, now."

Marlene stretched side to side and then front to back, windmilling her paws. "Keeping in shape takes discipline in zoo life, too. If I didn't exercise, I might splat against the br-bricks on a somersault --- " She stopped at the reminder of animal mortality.

Penny picked up on the mood swing with exceptional police instincts. "Something's happened."

"Um, right. It's serious news for the Park, not so much for the zoo, I guess."

Penny shifted uneasily. "Just tell me, Marlene."

Now, see, this was the part of anything for a friend motto that hurt. Marlene tapped her paws together similarly to a certain penguin team's method of displaying agitation. She targeted her pond from up high. "I will, I will, I just want to get closer to you. Here I come." She closed her eyes as she dove forward onto the slide, allowing its current to drive her body even as her mind cringed from what she had to do. The double and a half twist before splashdown was so ingrained that she didn't notice doing it.

Marlene didn't know how Penny would take the news about the unfortunate horse. This was secondhand gossip from the penguins, or 'intel' as they chose to call it, and since Penny was police and all, Marlene thought she ought to know. Alice's additional presence at her habitat frayed her nerves.

Penny's rider chatted up Alice in some coded fashion about clothing that bored creatures who wore none. As the police woman slung a leg over Penny's back to dismount and drew closer to Alice to sotto voce socialize, Marlene surfaced and looked around her habitat. There, by the photinia shrub was a rock perfect to stand on and deliver the bad news: at Penny's shoulder level and not face to face level. Marlene felt face to face was too intimate for her and Penny's state of acquaintanceship-bordering-on-buddyship.

Penny's curried reddish coat looked spiffy, well that would be typical to present a spruce appearance for the public. Marlene scrambled atop the rock and began. "Three days ago, a horse visited the zoo and was so darn friendly that this is going to be hard to tell you, Penny. She must have been" --- Penny would require cold, hard facts --- "late middle age, short black mane but her fur was super dark brown, and most of her tail looked sliced off, ouchie. Alice over there spooked her somehow and she raced away, the penguins sailed aboard to control her, I guess, and then she galloped into the sunset, only it wasn't really sunset oh you know what I mean." Aw, yeah, this news was hard to tell, so Marlene softened her voice. "The penguins said it happened pretty peacefully out in the park. Kowalski thinks it was a heart attack."
Penny's large brown eyes showed her sorrow as she bowed her head. "That was my sister, Colleen. The news got around already among us horses." Chittering between the two female humans went on for three minutes to fill in the silence as the two female animals communed.

Marlene finally came up with something to say. "Gosh, I'm sorry, Penny. Anything I can do?" Marlene's mother had always asked this when confronting grief; it was the saying of it that mattered most.

"Yes," Penny said. Good glory, Mom rarely heard that answer and so Marlene paid extra strict attention to help however she could.

"I'm listening, girlfriend."

"Tell me, how did Colleen look to you?"

Marlene ventured, "I saw her for maybe five minutes on her walk, no it was more a stroll. She greeted everyone, even the spider monkeys who yelled rude-sounding things." She thought a moment. "Oh yeah, your sister laughed at what they said, like she'd heard it all before, and she's the only animal I know who could have understood their talk oh I'm rambling. She hollered back something that I couldn't hear over the monkey screams but nothing seemed to bother her, she just moseyed along. The penguins gave her a nice little show that I could see from my habitat, and I'm sure she liked it until she got, um, upset."

Now the humans were discussing a shower, although the weather promised to clear up after a brief downpour just before dawn. Marlene and Penny shared a commiserating look at the denseness of police and zookeepers alike. "Thanks, Marlene. It means a lot to hear she enjoyed her outing." Then the starch washed from Penny as she cried out, "I told her she was pushing her luck getting loose all the time! I warned her! I know more about humans than she does! I'm younger than she is --- was --- but did she listen? No, she blew me off. She worked and worked like a slave for y-years---"

Mom would have patted and hugged, so Marlene did the next best thing she could in front of humans. She wept along with Penny. Another saying of her mother's crept into her comforting. "Th-The only way out is through."

Penny got it together eventually. "Y-You have a good heart, Marlene." She resisted the pull on her reins as her rider made to walk alongside Alice in the zookeeper's perimeter check of the zoo. "Shazbot, I must leave ---"

The police woman showed patience approaching that of an animal's. "Hey, now, heeyyyyyy, noooooo, easy easy, Penny." She cocked her head like Rico calculating the precise amount of TNT for a blast. "Hold on, Alice, my mount's skittish."
Alice grunted like when the Vesuvius Twins forced her to let them borrow Julien and Skipper. "All I know about horses you could put into a jigger pony, Filo. Now, if you rode a rhino --- "

"In my next life, for sure, bomboncita! Hold on, I know what works." Filomena removed one riding glove to give more sensitive skin-to-hide contact.

"She's stroking my nose, gah, that's my weak spot." Penny stopped dancing on her front feet. "Back to work, Marlene," she sighed and stepped out stolidly after her rider pressed her cheek to Penny's cheek with murmurings that Marlene couldn't hear.

Marlene swiped her face dry and followed the small group as best she could. "Wait, the penguins asked me to tell you to tell them or me if you notice anything off about Alice." She darted from the rock to scurry along the top of her brick habitat wall, keeping Penny's bulk between herself and the two humans.

Penny offered a worldweary opinion as she plodded. "All humans are off a little bit, even my primary rider --- "

"But this might be worse, like she can understand our talk" --- Marlene had never before heard a horse gasp --- "soletmeorSkipperknowokay? Ahhhhh!" They would see her! She dropped back into her habitat to press herself against the inside wall, chest heaving in bad nerves as a reply floated over the fence.

Marlene would ask Skipper later what Ten Four meant.

IOIOIOIOIO

A light drizzle misted the penguins' island that evening. "Roger."

"Ten Four means an alligator? How would that work?"

"Roger as in, I hear and understand, Marlene. Trucker and police lingo."

"So she will gather um, intel about Alice and shoot it back to you or me?"

Skipper clarified. "Not at all, because that would be Ten Ten Pea, reporting a suspicious person or prowler." He shrugged. "Ten Four means she heard you Five By Five."

"Stop, just stop it with the codes." Marlene poked his flipper as she considered his statement. "So Penny heard me and may decide not to surveille, I get it."
"Or she may decide to surveille. Whatever, Marlene, it means that it all comes down to us." Skipper squared his shoulders. "As usual."

Up through the open penguin HQ hatch drifted sneezes, coughs and sniffles along with Kowalski's "Here, swallow your medicine."

"K'walski, our date got bollocked kaff snort so wot ought we do next?" A wet sounding blend of sneeze and cough followed.

Marlene choked out, "Date? Kowalski and Private are dating?" She took half a step towards the hatch.

"Marlene, the date referred to was a wrinkled fruit, good for the health, you know, because Private and Rico suffer from headcolds." Skipper waved an airy flipper. "Rico horked up a mini charge of C-4 when he sneezed and the whole box of little fruits carrying iron-heavy nutrition splattered over the lair, real mess no you don't want a peek down there, trust me.” He brushed off his white front something that Marlene couldn't discern, yet the tiny specks of squashed dates doubtless disturbed his rigid sense of order. The mist would wash them off eventually, but Skipper would be proactive as usual. Her fondness for the bird came out with her next words.

"Trust you? Always."

Skipper looked disconcerted as he toed the fish bowl cover onto the hole. "Private and Rico's germs likely won't affect mammals, but why take a chance?"

Weeping with Penny ensured that Marlene's stirred up emotions remained on the surface and she hugged Skipper warmly. "You think of my good all the time, Skipper, and you took on this Alice thing with just my say-so to guide you, I appreciate it grande --- "

"Pshaw. Only doing my duty." Did the hug linger for any special reason? Marlene drew back to smile into Skipper's face, but he did not quite meet her eyes and let her loose with a final pat.

"I need to go. Tell Rico and Private to get better soon, all right?"

"Ten Four, Marlene."

She grinned before diving to the watery conduit that connected their habitats. "Wait, does that only mean you heard me and nothing else?"

"Go home, you nut." Skipper shoved her in an ungentlepenguinly fashion. She turned her fall into a graceful backwards dive like an arrow slicing the water with not a care in the world. Her problems were in capable flippers.
Chapter 18

As day followed day and they slipped in and out of each other’s dreams more often than not, Skipper realized things incandesced to a flashpoint between himself and Private. The Thanksgiving Talent Show proved him right.

Never had the team been in better voice on center stage of the Zoovenir Shop. The attentive smaller animals seated on checkout stand and plushy bins while Roy and Burt took turns viewing at the door, an evening's entertainment commenced Hollywood Palace style. Pinkie and her flock squawked Colors of the Wind as they river danced, the lemurs wailed Similau with Maurice on drums and the spider monkeys Ladysmith Black Mambazoed a decent The Lion Sleeps Tonight, yet the harmony of doo-wop Earth Angel was voted first prize, appendages down. Leonard's recitation of Invictus won second. Burt and Roy's haka duet placed third and nearly brought down the house, literally. All agreed it had been a tough playing field.

Skipper floated like his namesake butterfly as the team trundled homeward from the Zoovenir Shop. He hummed because he couldn’t help himself, the sublime lyrics to Earth Angel blending with the sultrier words to Similau. Say what you would about Ringtail’s priorities, his rendition of the tune with lyrics like beat the hollow cane and echo in the afterglow tended to lead the mind down the Happy Trail.

Please be mine

My darling dear

Love you all the time ...

Make the body ripe and alive again

Ay Similau, Ay Similau, Ay Similau ...

As Skipper hummed, Private skipped along and echoed everyone’s thoughts in that way he had. "Best talent show ever! Yayyyyy!"

"Wedateami!"

"Indubitably, Rico!"

Skipper cradled the trophy, a hoppity-frog clicker toy in Barry’s likeness, not his choice but hey, it was the acclaim that counted. "You sang well, men."

"You would have led us to victory, sir, with my falsetto or not! Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!"

Kowalski cheered with the others as they reached their faux floe. A faint 'huzzah!' echoed from Marlene’s habitat before the quartet dropped through the hatch. Rico hit the fridge straightaway for a drink. His cough had lingered longest from his headcold and Kowalski hypothesized it was because his miracle throat was the gateway from his miracle gut.

Kowalski backflipped onto their multi purpose table. "Leonard outdid himself with Invictus, way to go, Leonard, but for next year can’t we recite parts for Gunga Din?" He struck a pose, declaiming for all he was worth in his favored baritone. "I'll do the stanzas, Skipper, you do the rhyming lines!

You may talk o' gin an' beer
When you're quartered safe out 'ere,
An' you're sent to penny-fights an' Aldershot it;
But if it comes to slaughter
You will do your work on water,
An' you'll lick the bloomin' boots of 'im that's got it.

Now in Injia's sunny clime,
Where I used to spend my time
A-servin' of 'Er Majesty the Queen ...

"--- and then Rico pantomimes Din giving water, see, while Private plays the thirsty soldier in battle, and you, sir, rattle off the bits flaying poor Din alive, see, like this: You 'eathen, where the mischief 'ave you been? Can't you just hear yourself?"

"Heh. Yeah. I guess so." Skipper placed the Barry-clicker atop their TV. "Next Thanksgiving is a long way off, Kowalski." He sat at his usual head of table spot. "Who knows where we'll be then?"

Rico gasped over his juice box straw and Private clapped him on the back. "Sputterhackwhut?"

"Are we being transferred, sir?" Kowalski jumped down from the table. Three curious faces turned towards their leader.

"Huh? No! Not that I know of. I meant that in the philosophical sense."

Now Private choked, and he hadn't the excuse of spluttering over a swallow of juice. Kowalski and Rico took turns slamming his back.

"Ph-Philosophy? You?" Private finally managed.

He could do this. He could explain himself. It was difficult to find words, though. "Steady as she goes, tiny bunny steps, men --- where are we, as a team?"

"Suitable for any mission: underwater demo, covert ops, surveillance," ventured Kowalski into the six-minute silence.

"Foedawin!" averred Rico stoutly.

"We're at a crossroads, I think, gents." Private's statement earned a leaderly nod. "We're two teams in one, you, K'walski, and you, Rico, make up one team and Skippa and I the other."

Kowalski's brow climbed until you couldn't see his black-feathered crown for all the white. "Well, suuuuuure, if you think of romance, Private, but where does that stand in the scheme of our team? This unit consists of four superbly trained operatives ready for whatever mission comes our way, right, sir?" The scientist couldn't be more smug. That attitude had its uses, but not this time. Skipper chose his next words carefully.

"That's an outstanding answer for what we are, Kowalski, but Private cuts to where the heart of our team is." Private beamed. Oh, yeah, these were the right words. Why did Private's input shine light onto the murkiest issues? He'd think about that later. "We're two teams now and we were one before Åland. Our love lives found a way into our team life. It had to happen."
"Jolly good, I say."

Befuddled but willing to go along with the crowd, Rico could only spew, "Hah?"

Kowalski’s latest romance had sharpened his emotional senses to a large degree. "Well put, sir, and our crossroads is, um, er --- what, again?"

Now came the silly part, the part that was cliquish and strange for an adult bird well past the teen years. "Who we tell and what we tell and what do we do if Animal X says this and not that. You know, grownup stuff." Skipper forced out the word. "Politics."


A profound frown preceded a shrug. "Yagotme, 'Kippaaahhh."

"Try. That's an order."

Rico fistpumped as an idea struck. "'Enie!" He slumped. "Zatzalleyegot."

Progress! "Marlene, eh? Agreed, she's been our good friend a long time, even if she does side with the lemurs now and then."

Kowalski had had a few minutes to think and wanted details. "Tell her what? I don't get it. Why tell any animal anything? Doesn't that go against our covert operations mandate?"

Private wanted to know something, now that he had had time to think. "Yeah, I agree with K'walski, Skippa. It's nobody's affair, er, business, except ours." He grew plaintive. "Part of romancin', as I take it now I'm in one, is sweetly secret-like, at least from pryn' outsiders, and I think, um, I wouldn't fancy it if, er, everybody knew about you and me. I'd feel right spied upon." His soft blue eyes looked puzzled. "Wouldn't you?"

This confab was circling the drain, and Private's lack of experience with romance shone forth. Everyone would know about his love life sooner or later because there was always a certain look that two animals had when they were together-together that others picked up on. Controlling information was the way to go, per regs. "Out and up front is where we come from, team, because we come on from strength. We've faced down maniac dolphins, space squid invasions, sasquatches and clogged sewer drains. This intel, when we release it, doesn't change our operation one eensy bit." He sought to reassure. "Our command structure remains top secrecy secret, as always. I thought I implied that. This is brainstorming before any overt action, so chill out."

Kowalski reached a conclusion. "Mmmm, if that's the case and the Big Boss stays out of the picture, I'm good with --- what, a group meeting? Lemurs and all?"

"Lemurzugh." Rico was succinct as usual.

Time to wrap up this up and get back to celebrating their win. "Probably not, but I haven't decided yet. Group meeting, or individual meetings, or blast the news through Alice's intercom?"

Tittering died down after a while. "I am thankful that this meetin's over, Skippa, so let's enjoy the rest of Thanksgivin' before lights out. And tomorrow is Black Friday, a perfect day for a penguin! Well, halfway, anyway."

Perfect. Perfect. Perfect. The word echoed through Skipper's soul and without doubt, Black Friday
would be perfect for taking their relationship to the next level.

"How about a stroll, Private?"

"Is this an official date?"

Skipper smirked. "It's low key, so let this be the .5 to bring our dates up to a round number. You know how I like round numbers."

Rico yawned. "Gnite." Kowalski followed him into their bunk with a yawn himself.

The night bloomed like a black sapphire with starry roses deep in its depths. The two birds waddled by Burt and waved when he flapped his ears at them; the spider monkeys hunkered down in their tree, quiet for once; Marlene's snores reached their earholes from inside her cave; Mason and Phil looked at ease in their tree, hands entwined; and the rhino habitat held Roy in a rare asleep-on-his-side pose.

Private guided Skipper to the fountain, where they swam, splashed and played. Pennies cascaded in coppery piles on the bottom of the shallow waters, a substance to sculpt and swirl. Their eyes adjusted to the darkness and the water seemed nothing more than a new coat on their own feathery coverings. The fresh water did not buoy them as did their native seawater; it took effort to stay afloat. Skipper and Private slipped their flippers under each other's shoulders and paddled steadily, cheek to cheek until Private turned his head towards his love's.

"Sapphires, your eyes are like sapphires, Skippa. There are little stars in the blue parts."

"You're a poet, Private."

"You made me one."

"Aw, go on with you."

"It's true!"

"Mmmhm, if you say so." Skipper rubbed Private's neck. "Poetry and starlight are well and good, but ---"

"Yes?"

"We have earthier pursuits to enjoy that Mama Nature gave us and she did all right by us penguins, so how about you and I play a little deeper than kisses in her sandbox?"

Private's voice rose. "How about it? I say bloody all right!" He seized Skipper in a bear hug and rolled on top to push him under the water, grinding himself against the join of leg and body. From under the water, Skipper looked up at a loved face wracked with the awakening of lust, and he didn't advance on that territory, at least not just yet. Well within a penguin's breath control at a standard eighteen minutes, he watched as Private pushed, strained and finally came. The release dissipated into the water as Private slumped and Skipper held him in tender flippers after surfacing beside him.

"Breathe, boyo. Thaat's right, I've got you. I've always got you."

Private buried his face in the nook between Skipper's neck and shoulder and sobbed. "Thank you, thank you, Skippa and now I w-want to do somethin' for you ---"

Soon I won't need to beat the hollow cane by myself, thought Skipper. "I'm good for tonight because I sang how I feel about you. It's enough for one day. But tomorrow ---"
Private quivered for more reasons than one when the sapphires sparkled brighter than before.
Chapter 19

The old Frances bullied the new Frances as she tested her mini welder. Her audience of five remained ominously still, or was it attentively learning? She rolled her shoulders inside her protective coveralls. Thank Kaiju for YouTube instructional videos! The one showing how to make a spot welder using a car battery proved simple and true; as a zookeeper, she'd never had to do the grunt work of maintenance, but earning a minor in Art meant that she'd learned basic electricity in order not to fry herself or her classmates in Metal Sculpture 1A. The mini welder joined two thin slips of copper satisfactorily and she put it down to pick up her pipe bender.

The disconnected armature for Genderblender took shape as Chango demanded. Frances blended curves and spirals with nary a straight length in the pile of tubes. Chango's wrath dominated during Frances' final invocation with burning thoroughwort; the gentle, confusion-clearing nature of the herb vanished when Chango planted revenge for outrage in Frances' soul last night. That had surprised her, because she'd thought all her butt hurt feelings over being fired were of the past and they were not. But they will take form as the savage nature of childhood, Chango burned into her brain as the incense smoldered, and you will exorcise them as the boys and girls shriek like wild spirits in the woods. Make art of savage, untamed feelings that children experience before their filters overtake them. Speaking of feelings, Frances believed she was getting the hang of interpreting inspirations the orichas sent.

She'd never borne children and never expected to; did that make her immature? Could her personality help her understand children's purity? Saint Barbara paired with Chango in Frances' beliefs and the two women were virgins both, strong and independent in a way that made Chango respect them enough not to put the moves on them. At least, that was Frances' theory when she thought hard enough about it. Frances' vague idea of crafting "something to do with kiddies" hardened into purpose.

Now just how all this was to be conveyed in bright copper tubular shapes was up to Frances. It was the direction of emotion and sense of being right that drove her today, because Chango and all the rest of the gods never used words. Their communication rippled through the chasm between her world and theirs in thought-feelings, as she called them. The smell of incense, the chanting in time with the bongos and the exuberant dancing she indulged in last night made the downstairs neighbor bang on her ceiling, but she didn't care. The vision was true.

"Hey, Miss Frances, whatcha doon? C'n I help?"

"Stand back, bye! This be bilin' hot right soon!" The kid's big brown eyes reflected no hurt surprise; obviously, he'd been yelled at before. Frances put down the bender and used her helmet to cover the spot welder from curious eyes. Curious fingers would be next, and she couldn't have that. Was this boy sent from Chango? "Hey, nooooo, hey. Maaaybe you caaan. What's your name?"

He was eight or so, a knit cap over his curls and the rest of him jacketed and booted well in autumn's chilly morning. If she had to place him on her scale of wealth, his guardians or parents were of middling income. She peered around for an adult with the usual Papa or Mama Wolf expression,
ready to pounce if she looked dangerous. The bus driver from a while back waved at her without interrupting his conversation with a pal. Oh, that one.

"Dexter."

"And do you have a laboratory, Dexter?" She laughed, secure in her knowledge of Nickelodeon's programs that gained her entry into Kid World.

The kid was quick on the uptake. "Yeah, but I don't have a sister."

Sister? Her knowledge of the show didn't extend that far, so she bluffed in her usual fashion. "That's not to say you won't have one in future, bye, but the future is hazy-like. Here, tell me something."

He looked flattered at the attention from an adult, too young yet to show caution in situations like this. "Okay!"

"Do you hate anybody?"

"N-Not really. Mommy says not to hate anybody, no matter what."

"Mmm, your Mama be wise. But, bye, if you did hate anybody, who would it beee?"

A cloud of temper drifted over his face, as she had felt it would. "Marilyn. She sits at the desk across from me and I can't stand her." He pouted. "She's always getting B's."

The dad or whatever he was looked at the two of them conversing, smiled and went back to chatting up his pal. "I see in your future at least one B, maybe more." A bright smile showed Dexter's growing in front teeth, widely gapped. She decided to make use of Chango's gift. With his volatile temper, he might take back the gift any minute now. "Dexter, take this skinny coppery piece and show me how you feel when Marilyn gets another B. I'll show you how first."

Frances put on her work gloves, grasped either end of a three foot section of tubing, and made her war face. "Aaaargh!" She twisted and the tube turned into a C. "Aannnghttt!" A kink in the malleable metal formed, then eight more. When she was done, the tubing looked like a lightning bolt from Chango himself. How freeing this was! She helped Dexter on with the gloves. Dexter's hands in the big gloves held the tube clumsily. With an encouraging wink, Frances gestured to him to cut loose. He strained and the tube curved slightly. He looked at her for approval; she shrugged and winked again. A war whoop erupted as he slammed the tube on the ground again and again. He stood on one end of the C he'd formed and twisted with all his strength. The spiral pleased both him and Frances. She squeezed his shoulder as three members of her audience applauded and the fourth member approached. "Bye, good job."
"What's going on, Miss Frances?" The dad gripped Dexter's shoulders from behind in a bracing, supportive move. Dexter removed the gloves and handed them back to Frances shyly.

"Your bye helped me maaake art, baby. Take proper care of his talent, you and your missus." Now that the boy and the man were closer, she could see a strong family resemblance. Dexter looked straight up at the kind face.

"I had fun, Daddy!"

"That's what we came for, son. Tell Miss Frances goodbye." He fished in his wallet. "You can put this in the kitty on our way out." Dexter took the bills and was off already onto the next exhibit. Frances' smile was genuine as the man nodded and made his way along, too.

Ten minutes later, Frances' helmet obscured her face as she started up her spot welder once more. She shoved Chango to the back of her mind as she soldered the base of what would become Genderblender, Dexter's spiral and her own lightning bolt forming an ell. What came next would be the other parts of the base, not a boring squared off structure but a triangle, or dodecahedron, or whatever revealed itself to her artistic spirit. How neatly everything was coming together! Chango showed how females and males alike can wield power, and if Saint Barbara and he put their mojo to good use, she would finish her art piece by December 4th, the feast for them both.

It was all in the lap of the gods, and who knew what would happen when they stood up?

IIOIOIOIOIO

"Frankie, I got up early on Black Friday to secretly meet with you on a solo mission. This had better be worth climbing a tree in the park for. Tell your posse to shuffle way out on the branches to get out of earholeshot."

"Hey, evvabody, do what he says, for now. Getting back to youse, palio, youse still guarding dat feather I brungya from da legendary Crystal Falcon?"

"Er, yeah, it's safe in the lair. It never leaves our sight when we're home. Is that what you got your tailfeathers in a twist about? Come on, I got important things to do today."

"Like what?"

"None of your beeswax."

"Fuhgeddaboudit. Youse don't trust me, I don't trust youse."
"We're done. Watch out below, you flockers, penguin coming through."

"Nah, don't rappel away yet. Okay, here's da deal. Da Commissioner fired Blondie --- "

"Frances Alberta?"

" --- da one and only --- and she's gone nutso, tryna look like a tropic boid with her blue hair and acting like some Jamaica dame. No, I don't mean Jamaica, Noo Yawk. She's building a lightning rod ta fry our city, yours and mine, penguin! It's only began but I thought youse oughta know and put da kibosh onnit. I saw it by air flying ta da park yestiddy uh I was flying, not da rod."

"Hmmmm, lightning rods are safety features. We penguins are all about safety, for others, anyway."

"Did I say lightning rod? I meant a weapon, like something out of da weapons lab dat bozo Hans breaks inta alla time."

"How do you know Hans? Are you in cahoots with him? You ought to know he can't be trusted, but then neither can you, so forget I said anything."

"Him and me yakked it up oncet, he'd like ta be friends withchoo but he says you're so hard ta talk ta."

"I don't give a flying purple braap about Hans or you, so live with it. But hey, thanks for the intel. There might be something to investigate when we get back from the Magical Mystery Tour On The Crystal Feather Quest."

"Youse going on da Quest? Really? Wow, thanks!"

"Naw, just yanking your chain. Later. Coming through, gangway!"

"He gone, Frankie?"

"Yeah."

"Youse prank him like youse said?"

"Yeah."

IIOIOIOIOIO
"Anybody up for wrestling?" asked Skipper. All of a sudden, getting physical sounded like an _excelente_ way to celebrate Black Friday. Talking and eating and singing were all pretty sedentary, when you got right down to it. Except for him arising early to meet Frankie, the team had goldbricked all the livelong day and now it was evening.

"I am! I am, Skippa!"

"Rico and me, not so much, sir. Rain check?" Skipper nodded as he circled Private like a tiger shark in the Coral Sea at dawn. He slapped his thighs before bending to the floor to select an infinitesimal bit of grit. He tossed it into an imaginary ring. Private looked wise; sumo it was to be. The young penguin spayed his thighs, glared at his love and kicked another piece of grit into the ring. The tidiness lobe of Skipper's mind whispered _housecleaning can wait until after the holiday._

After stomping as Roy and Burt had done in their haka performance, Private came at Skipper like Hakuho. "Hiyaaaaahhh!"

"Eeeyyah!" offered Skipper, mirroring the stance as he furrowed his forehead, thighs wide.

Private grabbed the commander's middle to thrust upwards. Both Skipper's feet rose from the floor, but he fought dirty. He exhaled forcefully, Private failed to tighten his grip quickly enough and the feet hit ground once more. Skipper slid his flippers inside the grip with a master's technique, flippertips slicing close to Private's skin through the feathers without drawing blood. Private gasped, yet kept his grip as he strained to topple his friendly foe. Every back muscle came into play with the effort.

Skipper cupped a butt cheek in each flipper, spread his legs further and heaved. Now Private's feet dangled and he lost his grip, whipping into a non-regulation karate neck chop instead. The chop met corded muscle that did not give. Face to face, both expressions intent on the win, the two were well-matched.

Private pulled another kinjite of his own. He headbutted with his beak pointed straight down for safety and their noggins clinked like beer steins. Skipper rolled his head on his neck and fell backwards, all sumo to the end as he forfeited the match, although his honor dictated that he fall inside the ring. Since the style the team practiced skirted strict sumo rules, the whole match could be termed sumo lite. They lay together as close as two eggs in a clutch, panting.

"Now, Skippa, roll on top of me like you did last on our date number Five at the Riverdance movie in the zoo's 4-D Theater."

"Oh ho, ready for more? I've got moves I've never tried on you ---"
Kowalski and Rico eyed each other and took one step back and one apart.

"Wot? It's not wot you think --- hang about, there's no way to make this sound good. See, I had a nightmare and he grabbed me and I jumped him by commando reflex."

Skipper jumped into the explanation himself. "He fell asleep at the grand finale, that was it, really. He might be a touch blasé about dancing humans. I enjoyed all the show, though. They danced like prancing horses, like, like maybe that poor horse looked when she was young."

Private, Rico and Kowalski sobered. "Life is short, so go for the gusto, sir?" Kowalski and Rico linked flippers and tilted their heads together. Skipper avoided Private's gaze as he gained his feet to offer an assist in rising.

"Something like that. Hey, speaking of, how about some of the gin and beer you mentioned in the poem last night? A Dog's Nose, anyone? Not yet for you, Private."

"And why not? I'm ready for a cuppa --- of booze."

Skipper raised a flipper to shake it in a scold and then put it back at his side. "Um."

"Aw, lettim."

"I think he's ready, too, sir."

The time was ripe, as ripe as young Private. "All right, break out the booze for a nightcap." Heart thumping, Skipper switched the dial on the pivoting door's built in safe to 'bar' and turned the handle. A few dusty travel size bottles rested within. "Your choice, Private."

Private grabbed the first one without looking, breathing fast. "Green! It's green ... wot is it?"

"Gammel Dansk. Outstanding choice, soldier. Now just a little bit, you're not used to spirits. There."

Blushing under being center of attention, Private wet his whistle and managed not to choke. "Mmmm. Smooth and, and tasty. I like it!"

After Skipper saw Private's watery eyes uncross, he took the bottle for a sip before passing it along to Rico, who chugged a bigger swallow than Kowalski. Skipper, Rico and Kowalski nodded among themselves as Private wiped his eyes free of tears. The nod said volumes before Skipper managed, "See, men, he's ready, he's adult and he's mine." Skipper pulled Private closer for a chuck under the
Private brushed it off. "Ready? Ready for wot?"

"Oh, big boy stuff, Private. You'll like it." Kowalski grew tender with the young bird he'd seen hatch before his eyes. "Don't be afraid."

Rico hugged Private hard. "Luvya, kiddo."

"Well, sure, Rico, agape, righto?"

"Yah. Yah."

"And I love you, too, Private, in the aforementioned way. Really," Kowalski sniffled.

"Catchin' our colds, K'walski? I'm sorry!"

"No, no, just allergies or a passing whiff of onion from leftover Thanksgiving stuffing, um, never mind." The scientist cleared his throat with a pointed look at Skipper. "Be kind to him, sir."

Skipper's voice was soft. "He'll wind up none the worse, you'll see. Good night, men. Be back in a bit."

Private's gaze swept downward to his flippers clasped at his middle and his toes turned inward as he nearly stepped on his own feet. Kowalski took the situation at face value. "I do see. I make no judgments. Come along, Rico, you can help me with calibrating something in the lab. Bring your wellies."

Private took a while to get the unspoken message, but he did get it. He blinked once before his eyes grew as round as the watermelon they'd had for dessert yesterday.

"You and your imagination, K'walski. Sheesh. You, too, Rico. I'm shocked at the very idea," Private addressed to their retreating backs before the lab's door clanged shut behind them.

Skipper made an indiscriminate noise. "I'm shocked at myself for thinking the very idea, too, Private, but I like it." He drew a flipper around Private's shoulders. He fluffed the feathers there before smoothing them down again. "Even if nothing happened on that date what Kowalski and Rico were on about, you're cute as an Adélie penguin."

"Skippa, I don't think I've ever met one who was male."
Skipper accessed the mental closet where a dearly missed image emerged from the team's keepsake cabinet. It was a glassed in hutch that held the metaphoric figurines of Manfredi, Johnson, and Xochi. Skipper was general Keeper of the Archives, but any team member accessed the cabinet at will. He blew away dust motes from an exquisite female carving and held it up to light before reshelving it and shutting the door. "They're cute because Xochi was cute and what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander or some folk saying like that, so take my word for it, they're cute."

"So you see me as cute? I think the same! Er, I mean not about me bein' cute, but you're cute, oh you know wot I mean."

It was difficult to hold back without acting on his impulse, but Skipper possessed discipline he'd never even used yet. He spoke half to himself, half to Private. "I've never gone past second base --- not with a male --- "

"It's not so hard, surely?"

"Oh, it's hard, all right." Skipper closed his eyes and willed himself to calm before looking at the blank space that Rico and Kowalski occupied moments before. There was a crash! and tinkle! from the lab, business as usual.

"I'll preen you first and then we'll jolly well see wot happens."

Skipper plotzed without being asked and it was as if the lair held dazzling disco balls as Private crooned to himself while digging his beak into oil glands. He alternated between his own and Skipper's until Skipper could hardly keep still. The beak dipped low to where each feather grew from a dimple and then slicked outwards with a gleepsh sound that threatened to drive Skipper crazy. The disco ball spun and before he knew it, Private upended him to reach those hard to get places. "Aaaah, st-stop psshhhhbip wigglin'."

"You stop! Right this minute! I'm going to explode if you don't!"

"Ooooh, a little previous, are we?"

slap slap tickle slap tickle pinch

"Alllll done."

"Fantastic!"

"Get your breath. Sorry I was a tease, it just comes naturally, I suppose."
Skipper's ribs heaved. "D-Don't ever change, promise me. I love you this way."

"Right back at you, Skippa." Private helped Skipper up, patting and smoothing endlessly as if he couldn't get enough of feeling the shiny waterproofed coat.

Skipper asked the easiest question he'd ever need to pose. "Would you consider accepting my pebble?"

Private's eyes filled. "Only if you'll accept mine. That's the way it works for me."

Both penguins bent to their commonplace cement floor and each found a bit of grit. They pressed it into each other's flippers, then threw it per tradition into the nearest water. Naturally, the two bits bounced off the glass porthole and were lost among the other bits on the floor. There would be no sentimental keeping of the things; they were the outward symbols of an invisible bond.

In a spasm of joy, Private kissed Skipper until both grew out of breath. "Black Friday and we two found somethin' priceless to buy, right, Skippa?"

Skipper made doe eyes and had his beak open to blubber out a sappy reply when Private shifted away from his embrace to face him dead on. "And no more Chinstraps or Violas or Kitkas or Dorises or any bloody others, are we clear?"

"Not even once?"

"No."

"Oh." To his chagrin, Skipper channeled Ringtail in his mind's eye. The lemur belted out Waiting for the flame to burn again with a questioning look in his golden eyes and the answer was yes. Skipper initiated the issue because he wasn't quite ready to hear Private ask such a question. "Wanna braap, then?"

"Wot do you think?"
Chapter 21

Skipper could hold a poker face indefinitely, but this sitch had him smiling earhole to earhole. He pursued his choice of tactic as he had planned in strategy meetings with himself many weeks ago. His outline of Operation: Full Steam Ahead started with loving glances and soft romancing. "Look at the stars, crisp and clear, aren't they perf--- " he began after sliding the food dish over the hatch.

"Skippa, I've waited and you've waited. It's time we got down to brass --- "

"Go down on you? Sure!" Tactics were nothing if they could not be switched out at a moment's notice, as any good field officer knew in his gut. Recalling inexactly how this tactic went, Skipper licked the corner of Private's beak before skimming his form in sure flippers to keep up contact as he trailed his tongue down the white chest and belly. Kneeling, he found what he sought through an ocean of foam-white feathers. He framed it with a circle of his flippers.

It was timidly adorable, filling slowly. This would take finesse. Private's cock lost what momentum it had as Skipper kissed it. He pulled back to Pre-Stage One by circling its base with an attentive tongue before slicking from his flippers along its top to the cockhead and beneath on the way back to his flippers. There was a little something to work with after that.

Spiraling licks from base to tip and back to base progressed the darling thing to half mast. Breathing on the cockhead made it to three quarters full, but Skipper foresaw that he'd need to go all the way to Full Stage Three with this first timer. He was rested and ready for the delightful task. "Lie down, Private," he said in a voice too soft for a command. Private complied with a trademark giggle as Skipper settled between his thighs.

Skipper turned to with a will as Stage Two commenced. He opened his beak wide enough to take in all of Private's cock and after a wild thrust set him to coughing, he had to withdraw. "Easy, easy," he said when he could. "We've got the whole night."

"Sorry, Skippa. I won't do it again."

"Mmmm, let's rethink the, er, sequence. No use risking a flameout." He himself made sure his governor did its job to keep him hard but not bursting; yes, there it was, as well regulated as ever. Private's governor was non-existent, as far as he could tell, and there was a real danger of a premature spend that would damage budding confidence. Another way to success was to surge ahead into port so as not to tax anyone's control. "Private, what would you like next?"

"I'm on fire! Put it out please!"

"Roger that!". Steam into port it was to be. Skipper tossed away his outline except for Full Stage Three. He hoisted Private's legs atop his shoulders and dove into his target as Private flailed his flippers. He nuzzled aside feathers, as excited as he'd ever been.

"On deck, soldier!" Oh yes, there it was, fully ready, willing and able. Skipper chuckled. "Aren't you just the cutest thing!" Private's decent sized cock popped up as if spring loaded and Skipper squeezed it fondly before flattening it against an endearing rounded tummy. It struggled against Skipper's flipper as would a fledgling of Kitka's who yearned to slip the surly bonds of earth. The last time he had been a party to this, Kitka's wing held him hostage. In his mind's eye, he waved farewell to her as they drifted apart forever.

Skipper pushed the flat of his tongue against the puckering strings at the top of Private's opening,
which he laved like the most delicious snowcone ever concocted by Luigi The Snowcone Man. When Private flowered like an anemone, he licked a circle before pausing. At the impatient wiggle, Skipper grinned wickedly before he speared the relaxed hole true as a die with the furled point of his tongue. "Gahhh, wot is this --- wot are you d-d-d-doin' --- oh that's good no that's bloody fantastic -- -"

_Cute_ and _precious_ were the words that popped into the commander's mind at the darling that strove to break free from his flipper. He reamed the quivering hole to gain and give the utmost pleasure without sending Private or himself over the edge. "Oh Skippa, I can't stand it it's, it's too much. Stop."

"Not happening." Private would thank him later for being firm because now was the time. Skipper shuffled onto his knees to get into position. He invaded his beloved with a steely gaze and a sizable cock.

"Gahhhh," said Private.

"Oh," was all Skipper could reply as Private welcomed him inside with trembles and shivers. The rest of the young penguin was limp with the shock of the deflowering. That was all right, too; there would be time later for cosseting. Skipper thrust and withdrew, gritting his beak as he called upon all his discipline. There was no way he would come too soon and spoil Private's first time as his first March had been spoiled by a rampaging sasquatch.

"Oh oh oh." Were the sounds from him or from Private? Skipper didn't know.

After some minutes, the slow and careful ins and outs sped past _anyone's_ control. He flashed faster and then shaky flippers hugged Skipper's surging shoulders while a tiny grin bloomed on Private. Could he be _sure_ it wasn't an act? "It, it's good, Skippa. More, please."

There was passion in the response that he'd only felt from Kitka as Private's hole rippled around him and he knew he was split seconds away from coming.

Skipper stopped and slid out. He couldn't do it. He couldn't destroy such innocence. Private wasn't crying _now_ but he _might_ and the thought undid him.

"W-Wot's wrong? Skippa?"

No, this part of their couplehood would go no further tonight or any other night. Or day. Or twilight or dawn or at that time just after sunset when everything looked grayish white --- he found himself blithering in a most unleaderly fashion, but thankfully only in his own mind. "Er, I just can't. I'm sorry, Private."

There was an uncounted stretch of time that he would always recall with shame as he expected Private to set aside his lust-dazed thoughts long enough to quote a platitude from a Lunacorns episode. It would be _If At First You Don't Succeed, Etc._ from namby-pamby Prince Sharesalot in Season Two unless he missed his guess.

"Let me help you," Private said instead. He reached down to coax a response from something that had shrunk into quietude. It actually hurt when the young penguin's flippertip touched the cockhead.

"That's not going to work because I don't want it to." Skipper brushed aside the caress and tried to wring success from this fiasco.

"Was it somethin' I did --- or said --- or didn't do --- or didn't say --- "
Frustration sharpened his tongue. "For Van Damme's sake! No!"

This was yet another case of Private's pure nature being tested and not found wanting. Skipper cringed under the weight of having to explain his change of attitude. He was not good with words. It had never seemed so crippling as now.

Private sat upright and cupped his commander's face. "Wot, then?"

All right, stick with what you know how to do: secure a beachhead. "I love you."

"We've established that."

Deploy strategy. "I can't bear to hurt you."

"Skippa, I'm not afraid --- "

State tactics. "But I am. I just can't do this thing." There was a sea change happening in Skipper's mind, a basic shift that he noticed but did not comprehend. It was as if the whole zoo were listening in on this delicate conversation and weighing in with options. Well, at least the animals; he shuddered to think of what Alice would say.

Accept feedback. "Um, well, Skippa, I, um, want to do somethin' er, uh, after savin' myself for --- "

Finalize modified tactics. "You do me instead." Protect and sometimes, sacrifice. Skipper took a deep breath.

"Wot?"

"You heard me."

"Crikey, is that an order?"

"Of course not. It's a suggestion. I want to do something, too."

"Skippa, whenever I think wot would Skippa do this never comes up." But there was a little bit of speculation in the words, a scintilla of suspense. Skipper heard it and decided to pursue the subject because to his earholes Private would do it. He would likely need coaching, though.

"I'll tell you what to do --- "

"I'll do wot you did to me."

"You don't have to go that far --- "

"Don't you want me to, honey?"

"Babe, I would love whatever you do. It's just that what I did might be too advanced for you --- "

Uh oh. Now Private would feel honor bound to give the same pleasure in the same fashion when really, simple was the way to go tonight and in these circumstances. He was humbled at Private's answer.

"I'll do wotever you like, Skippa. I think the basics are straightforward enough." And wonder of wonders, his love laughed and thrust a companionable flipper through his own. "Honey, you called me babe."
There was hope for this night after all. "Babe, you called me honey."

Private got straight to work.

Skipper had been wrong. Now was the time. Now was when their love would become real in the way of all birds. The commander breathed in the rhythm he had observed with Kitka when she displayed her banded russet underbelly feathers before lifting her tail to drive him crazy. Pant pant pant whooosh pause and repeat. Private's eagerness betrayed his youth and soon Skipper found himself shoved to face towards their habitat's Fascinating Penguin Facts plaque on its kiddie-height post. Bemused, he felt Private's deft touch as he splayed his commander's legs to the perfect angle and then time telescoped where everything happened at once. A firm press to the back and Skipper went down to elbows and knees with rump presented to the starry sky. Why, this wasn't so difficult.

Then soft feathers slid from tail to middle of the back as Private's weight descended. Skipper smiled in bliss. A hard tipped something broke through the sheen of his coat and tapped his spine between his shoulder blades. Confused by the sensations, he spun his head around. Aw, it was Private's beak as the tip probed between vertebrae pleasantly enough and determined flipper's settled on the points of his shoulders. What sort of technique was this?

He was about to ask when his eyes popped wide at a decisive thrust from a matured hardness. No timid moves here; Private steamed ahead until fully seated. A hnnnnnnnn made its way up Skipper's throat until it became a whistle through his nostrils and his head snapped back. Maybe he should have encouraged more preparation after all.

"You okay, Skippa?"

The sweet bird was worried about him. "Erk."

"Wot?" Private paused, thank Hannibal's elephant brigade.

"Stay still for a moment-t-t-t-t-yeah. Like uhn that." Everything would adjust because it had to. Skipper panted some more and thought about Kitka. She wheeled overhead through the clouds in his mind while she defied banishment to his past, which was so like her. He brought his head to its normal cant and then bowed it down to the concrete while his shoulders heaved. He swallowed hard. That had hurt a great deal. Private would be in tears by now and the night truly spoilt. Or would his careful preparation have made all the difference once he really turned up the heat on his love to turbo and beyond? Ah buttermilk biscuits, the deed was done.

Private rubbed soothing circles on Skipper's back. "There now, all in."

He'd always pitched and never caught, not that he'd had a chance because each partner had been female and his threatening rapist failed to make good his terrorizing plans. He'd broken up with Kitka before she could bring out the toybox that she'd hinted at. He clamped his beak shut around a groan. So this is what catching felt like. There must be something appealing in it if others thought so. He'd be patient as if on a stakeout. Where were the doughnuts and coffee?

Private trembled with the strain of not moving, poor kid. "All right. Follow through, soldier."

Private did.

After three strokes, the newness faded and the experience transformed to Skipper's least favored maneuver, Routine Seventeen: Just Relax And Take It You Fool. He had resigned himself to a pleasureless session when Private pulled himself back from frenzy and reached around to Skipper's front. A fumbling moment later, something quiescent had straightened to half mast as feelings battled
for dominance. Skipper settled for a point between discomfort and the usual enjoyment when he beheld a sunrise. By the way that Private lugged to the finish line, all this would be over soon. Kowalski and Rico would be wondering what had happened to the two of them. Skipper's mind floated to presenting the scenario in the best possible light. "Fate accomplie," he might say to be debonair or perhaps "Mission accomplished" like G.W. Bush never said but everyone assumed he did. Maybe a simple, understated wink?

Private's beak drummed a staccato on his vertebrae, he shouted Skipper's name and then it was all over with. That hadn't been too bad at the end, really. Thinking about Kitka had helped. Now he and she leveled up even more. He mused on the best way to find her and tell her or if he even should and then the present circumstances zoomed back into focus.

Skipper slipped forward with a wince and knelt by Private to hold his flipper. The young penguin lay on his side with his eyes closed. "Worth the wait?"

The blue eyes that beguiled him slid open although of course mere moonlight did not illuminate color and Skipper had to rely on his memory. "So much. So, so much. Mmmm, yeah. So much."

Skipper allowed the moment to take its own shape. A bit later, Private sat up and stroked Skipper's flipper in return. "You didn't get anythin' out of it, Skippa."

Skipper shrugged. "If you think first times are undiluted joy for both parties, Private, I've got news for you."

"So I see. I tried to give back --- "

"--- and you did. It's all right." Skipper pecked Private's cheek and Private's best smile broke through.

"It was more than all right, it was bloody marvelous! When can we do this again?"

Skipper waddled with a wider stance than normal as he made his way to the hatch. "Uh, soon! Let's not destroy the spontaneity, okay?"


"Er, yeah. Soon. Watch your step, here's the hatch."

Skipper decided on a sly wink to Kowalski and Rico and the night passed as one of the team's normally did.

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Chapter 22

It was rare to have a clear night perfect for stargazing in the Big Apple, but Black Friday's crisp ether filled the bill. Arcturus incandesced redly overhead to remind Marlene why it was her favorite constellation because red and pink were the colors of St. Valentine. From her perch on the zoo boundary brick wall, she made her customary sweep around the points of the heavenly compass. Just because it was tradition, she followed the handle of the Plough to arc to Arcturus and spike to Spica even though she could have found them blindfolded. She sniffed the city smells and dreamed of romance past and future. The present was another matter.

It took half an hour for her to glide back to Earth. "Oh, Marlene, you ninny. Romance won't bloom with you out here stargazing alone, you've got to move it move it, girlfriend. Somewhere around is the love that will last." She snickered. "At least as long as you want it to." She trained her sights within the zoo. There was Julien, shaking his booty towards her all unawares. For goodness' sake, Maurice was animated tonight as he improvised a hang ten sign with Mort after every fifth high kicking step. Robot-dancing Mort continued being the poster child for zoo adorability, bless his little heart. Private had been graceful in the end when giving up his own spot on the coveted zoo brochure cover to the mouse lemur. Hmmm, speaking of Private, were the penguins outdoors tonight? The telescope swiveled silently in their direction.

As she watched, two penguins gained the roof of their secret lair that mimicked an Antarctic ice floe in mundane textured concrete. She cranked the focus to discern Private and Skipper at camouflage night maneuvers or stealth undercover games or something like that, she wasn't sure. Wow, they sure did work out all the time, look how ripped they were! Marlene waited for the rest of the team to join them. No, it seemed to be just Skipper and little Private. Now what were they doing? Some Greco-Roman wrestling? She focused closer.

This couldn't be what it looked like. Whoa, Private kissed Skipper until his commander seized the young penguin's shoulders to break the clinch. Skipper gathered up Private like a bride and threw him high into the air. Marlene caught the faint sound of a happy squeal and then Private landed on Skipper to receive a positively smothering hug. Following kisses with lots of tongue, the two dropped to the concrete to groove each other helplessly ... uh, now what ... oh good golly ... good grief ... was this Routine Thirty-Two: Confuse And Distract? That was the only routine number she could remember. Boy howdy, was this a confusing distraction! Marlene fanned herself.

She should look away. She couldn't.

Private tumbled Skipper over and over until Skipper was on top and then Private's back arched as Skipper worked his way downward. Private's flippers spread out to their limit and drummed a tattoo. Skipper did something delightful that made Private roll back and forth until a command that she couldn't hear rendered him stock still. Skipper crawled his way upward to cover nearly all of Private from her view. He moved decisively in and Private's head snapped back.

At last Marlene wrenched her eyes from the lovemaking pair. She leaned on the telescope, which shot straight up to point to Sirius, the Dog Star, believed by ancient Greeks to inflame desires. She squirmed, gave herself a moment to collect her thoughts and departed for her habitat, towing the telescope by one tripod leg. After a minute, she straightened and put the rig over her shoulder as usual. "Skipper, you owe me an explanation."

She was still thinking eleven nights later about how to get --- intel, was that what the penguins called it? --- as she strummed her guitar. The notes tripped over themselves to get out of her head and into the air to convey her feelings as honestly as they always did. She needed to play something she
knew backwards and forwards to ground herself, so she picked Malagueña. She strummed faster at
the E chords as she remembered Skipper's finely honed talents with this, the musical instrument she
adored --- instrument she adored --- instrument she adored --- what in the world was that knocking?

"Marlene, it's Skipper. Can I come in?"

Up from the drainage grate echoed knocks where none had ever come before. The crazy time when
the penguins had believed her to be a rare arctic mink named Arlene did not count. "Skipper?"

"The one and only, if you don't count Gilligan's Skipper or the pretty little butterfly known as a
skipper."

She had needed a good laugh. She stood the guitar against the wall. "You have never observed
boundaries as well as this. I'm impressed. Your trophy win must have done you worlds of good." He
didn't need her help lifting the grate but she hefted her share anyway. "Hey you."

"Hey. He settled the grate back down and they hugged. She indicated the guitar. "Play for me?"

He looked surprised. "O-Okay. What'll it be?"

"I'm open to anything except Dixieland."

"Bttttppp, not much guitar in Dixieland. All right, sister, extemp it is." He pointed to the floor.
"Plotz."

To give herself time to think, Marlene picked up the vase of flowers and sniffed them before starting
to pour out the water from the vase into a water glass. She saw Skipper about to point it out and
cought the error with a titter that sounded unsure to her own ears. She poured herself a drink from
the carafe sitting next to the vase as she'd meant to do in the first place. In her confusion about the
reason for his visit after what she had seen that night, she didn't really know what to expect from him
tonight. She had thought their friendship to be rock solid and immutable. Surprises were ... okay,
but not one of this importance. After stealing a glance at him, he looked as if butter wouldn't melt in
his beak. Well, okey dokey. Except for sixteen wriggling pollywogs in her belly, she was fine, just
fine, thank you.

Skipper playfully pulled out an imaginary chair for her as they improvised a scene dining in an
exclusive restaurant. He picked up her guitar to be a Gypsy strolling musician as she plotzed and
then mimed cutting her entrée into three neat pieces. She batted her eyelashes at him and sipped
from her water as she made up her mind. "Gypsy, I want gypsy and not mariachi. Roma tonight, sir."

"As you wish." Marlene gave a start as she wondered where she had heard that phrase before.
Skipper bent to light an imaginary candle at her table and then he wafted around her with a warrior's
grace as she heard stylings nothing like she had ever heard before. Riffs interspersed between
apoyando and tirando sections. She found herself swaying and clapping her paws at the flamenco
golpe and was taken off guard when enough rasguando to tire even Segovia's fingers issued
effortlessly in Skipper's musicale. At the rousing climax, she melted into a helpless, quivering pile of
guacamole. Were these Spanish Roma, Roma Roma, and Hungarian Roma melodies with Buenos
Aires Roma airs blended in? She might never know nor care. The pollywogs disappeared into the
sludge at the bottom of her psyche.

She must have looked spacey because Skipper stood the guitar against the wall and waved a flipper
in front of her eyes. "Don't faint before we get to the good part, Marlene. Nobody I ever, um,
visited did that unless I got super creative." He smiled and she came back to herself although her
paws still trembled.

"G-Good part? I don't know if I can stand it, Skipper." She picked up her glass of water only to spill it on her front. "Look what you did! You got me wet."

He brushed off the water before she shot him a look and then he passed her the doily from under the vase. She mopped and got presentable. Confidence straightened her backbone from its sensuous slump. "Well. That was a lovely concert, Señor Penguin." She replaced the doily and twiddled with the vase to have something to do. "I'm glad you came." Gads, it was going to be one of those evenings of double entendres that would redden her skin beneath her fur. "I mean, visited." Suspicion sharpened her tone. "You can come anytime --- again, Marlene, really? --- "and it's great you did, don't get me wrong. There's something I need to pick a boner --- bone! I totally meant bone! --- with you about, though." Oh ho, there was the blush but she forged ahead anyway. "I looked into your habitat eleven nights back about nine-ish with my telescope ---"

"A bone --- Huh? You did?" Whatever aplomb had graced him during his performance fled and she had the distinct impression that his skin reddened, too, though she'd need to ruffle his feathers to see the blush. She pictured herself doing this in a different context and flushed crimson. Back to the matter at hand.

"I did. I didn't mean to but it was a primo night for stargazing, and well ---"

Now there was anger of the sort that he had shown her when she had tried to match up Shelly with Rico. It was muted with disappointment and perplexity. "So you saw Private and me together and realized that we are beyond the crush stage. I'm disappointed in you and perplexed why you kept on watching. We're not that photogenic, well, Private is because he's the cute one ---"

"Look, Skipper, before this gets out of hand that neither of us has, a hand I mean, I want to say that I'm shocked." All these days later, it was coming out --- again, Marlene, watch your self talk before you go incoherent --- that she was shocked at herself that she hadn't recognized shock for what it was. It took Skipper, her friend, standing right in front of her to help her identify the protective feeling for Private that bloomed in her bosom. The greater shock was that it had been roused to such a degree. Her bosom heaved as her voice rose. "I'm shocked that you coerced ---"

"Coerced? That's court martial behavior, Marlene! Watch what you say! Private and I are completely legal and consenting adults. For your information, he came on to me and I --- I --- I spent weeks thinking about what would be right for both our squad and for its individual members and I'll have you know ---" She had forgotten what it was like to see him splutter and pump his flippers as if he could fly. She giggled.

Bad move.

"Not funny, woman. I came over here to ask if you wanted to catch our all night Shirtless Ninja Action Theater marathon with us. I'll be leaving now."

Marlene had a temper, too. "Hmmm, let me pencil that movie date into my Blackberry! I just can't wait to see bloody mayhem!"

Skipper curled one flipper into a fist of frustration. "If I've replaced your cute and naive with my sarcasm, it doesn't suit you." He was halfway to the grate before she grabbed him from behind.

"Aw, stay. I'll apologize." He hauled her three steps before stopping. She felt the brawn beneath the feathers shake with anger and then he calmed down. He spun in her grip and they were muzzle to beak. They broke apart. "I'm truly sorry, Skipper. If you want to talk, I'll listen, and if you don't
want to talk, that's okay, too. But I hope you want to and I won't need to wonder if my friend is off kilter. I'm speaking of Private here. You, my main bird, are something beyond friend." She looked deeply into him. "I'm not sure if it has a name."

"Friend will do for now." Skipper took another pace back. "Well, Marlene, what you saw is what we got. He *likes me* likes me." He softened into vulnerability. "And I feel the same."

Marlene stepped on the moment because what popped out contained all her perceptions of what Skipper was and did and those perceptions spun in their graves.

"Private. And you?"

"Me and Private, yeah. Only it doesn't sound right, the way you say it." He placed his flippers on his hips. This was not going to end without ruffling fur and feathers. So be it. If he wanted to, he could describe to her the look on her face as she ground her crotch against Ringtail's and nearly inhaled his soft, fluffy neck fur the first time they all discovered she would devolve to a wild animal state outside zoo walls. He would take the high road, he would. He had helped her to overcome her feral spells and now she could pay him back a bit, not that he was bookkeeping or anything like that.

Marlene adopted Skipper's pose without realizing it. "I'm sorry, what about it doesn't sound right? I saw what I saw through a high power lens, Skipper."

Skipper got hot under the collar despite his resolve. "Damn, Marlene, I don't have many secrets left from you, do I? Mind if I sit down?"

Before she could say yes, Skipper plopped himself on her bed and swung his feet. He refused to endanger his friendship with her. This new Private development was permanent and he wanted her in his life as before, too. He appraised her critically. "I'll need to tell somebody besides the team first, I guess. You're my friend and can keep a secret better than Ringtail, that's for sure." He snorted. "If he's my friend, I hate to think how small the pool of my friends is outside of Atlantis and our HQ Command." Someone with his voice said, "Look this is new to me as well as to the whole team and we need sitch recon time and in civvy talk that means --- "

"I can guess. So, yeah, uh, you've never told me about your HQ Command or Atlantis --- "

"Need to know, sister, and let's just say your security clearance ... isn't."

Marlene rolled her eyes as she sat beside him on her bed, not quite touching. "Pfft. As if I need a security clearance to see any more of your deep dark secrets. No no, that's all right, Skipper. I don't expect to find out *everything.*" She could give him this, but he wasn't wiggling out of explaining as much as she could handle what he could handle telling her. "Let's get back to what I saw." She examined the pansies in their vase, still slightly miffed. "And don't flatter yourself, I've had better, er I mean, I could tell that you were good at what you were doing and Private had no room to complain oh somebody *please* stop me --- "

Skipper ceased swinging his feet. He studied the rug that comforted her tootsies when she first got out of bed. The rug contained colorful swirls of rags with bits sticking up here and there, bright paisley as appealing to some as Marlene's swish of white fur on a shapely chestnut leg. Oh, for simplicity, sweet lost simplicity; he'd give a truckload of smoked salmon if nobody had seen them, even if it were the mammal he trusted most. He considered her nice, open face, her appealing eyes that waivered between amber and hazel and savored their time-tested friendship. It would be all right to confide in her. He twisted to face her straight on. "Private and I are an item. It started little by
little like I told you before, so don't ask me exactly when I knew I loved him.” He owed her a
detail. “I think it was on Åland right before we left. We swam together and it just, um, came up.
The feels, I mean.”

The eyes that had whispered of attraction from the first time he had met her flared to unbelieving
pools. “Wow, Skipper, that didn't take any time at all. I thought I'd have to drag the bigger L word
out of you.” He had moments to see belief settle in the pools like spent autumn leaves drifting to
their bottoms to bide their wintry time until they could nurture new life in the spring. He had
moments to wonder about his recent bent towards poetry as she processed what she'd just heard.
"He's ... young," she ventured.

That had been exactly what he had thought in the beginning. She and he flew on the same
wavelength, if penguins and otters could fly. "He's adult enough.”

She cleared her throat. "I mean, he's bound to need teaching or training or, or, or, something that
you commandos do. From what I could tell, he seemed into it but not well coordinated. I looked
away when it was obvious that you and he weren't practicing wrestling moves oops I mean night
maneuvers okay forget I said that. He was cherry, right?"

"As I said, Marlene, need to know.” By her words, she had stopped peeking before he and Private
switched the batting order. That was fine with him. He needed time to think about what to say, who
to say it to, and whether it needed saying at all. Damn, he wished she had not seen him because this
added a layer of deceit to their friendship. Well, that was what adulthood was all about: the need to
zip the beak shut about some things and not tell any one bird --- or mammal --- everything.

"Aw, okay, keep it to yourself, then. I'm no busybody like Pinkie. I care for him and for you.” She
lay back on her bed as the visit's complexities washed over her. She intended to sleep on them. "I'm
tired. It's late and I don't stay up nights on missions like your team does." She curled into a
companionable scimitar shape and patted the space beside her. "C'mon, dish."

He hesitated and then reclined. There was only one pillow so they shared it. "I gave him my
pebble." Had her eyes always been this mix of honey and amber? He discarded hazel from the
blend because he saw no flecks of green.

"Y-You did what?"

"It's a penguin thing. It's like if I gave you a friendship bracelet, only um, more so. It's for life."

"Oh, my. Oh. My. That's huge! Congratulations, Skipper!"

"Why, thank you, Marlene." Now that he had started talking, the dam burst. "It was so braaping
easy it blew me away. I just up and went and did it. I never wanted to give my pebble to anyone
before, not even Kitka. It was natural as swimming to give it to Private. When he gave me his, too, I
- I - I ---” He needed a moment. "Er, this is important to me, Marlene. Don't tell anyone."

"Well, all right, Skipper. I won't. Do I get to give you anything?"

"Huh?"

"Like a lair warming gift, uh, I'm in the dark here about penguin pebble customs --- "

He rubbed the pads on her paw and she nearly purred. "You could take him under your wing, er
arm, oh you know what I mean. He's never been in anything long term because Cupid was a
summer, uh, winter fling. He thought Shawna was cute but that was about the limit of the attraction
because, ew, anyone who deploys needles regularly couldn't be appealing for long." Shit, more
explanations. He was running low on inspiration. "What I mean is, he might need a confidante better than Prince Sharesalot to talk with about how to get along with me in our um, relationship. You're a girl, tipsy facto, and that's your bag." There. He'd set up a sitch for his love to be closer to his friend. It couldn't possibly backfire.

She blinked sleepily. "Mmh, yeah, sure, under my wing, that's fine. Not to burst Private's bubble, Skipper, but Shawna is human."

"So?"

"I'm not even going to go there --- "

"Doris is a dolphin, Cupid is one of Santa's reindeer, Kitka is a falcon. Your point?"

"Um, never mind. I'm not thinking clearly at this hour. Night night." She yawned and patted his chest apologetically. "Talk to you tomorrow." Her eyes opened wide. "What's that bump on your chest? I never felt it there before."

"We ran into a bad sitch on Åland and I got hurt. It's healed up. What are you doing?"

Marlene riffled his feathers and found what she sought. "Poor baby! That looks awful! First the toe, now the chest." She smoothed the whiteness back over the pinkness. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"It's a long story. I had treatment to make the scar better but it seems it didn't work as well as Kowalski thought it would. Maybe another time I'll tell you the whole megillah, Marlene." He grew thoughtful. "You know, my getting within spitting distance of the Endless Iceberg might have pushed me and Private closer --- "

This time, instead of inane questions about whatever the Endless Iceberg was, Marlene held her tongue to allow him to continue. He didn't. She yawned again. "Skipper, really, congratulations." She kissed the air in his direction and closed her eyes. "Don't let the drain cover bang you on the way out. Aw, hush puppies, I so did not mean that the way it sounds --- "

Skipper stood up. "Hmph. Mammals." He knew that she knew he didn't intend it as a slur for her.

"You know it, pal. We're both warmblooded but you, my friend, are the one in the hot relationship." She forced her eyes open and regarded him sweetly. "I'm glad you told me how things really went down, er, went. I wouldn't want to think of Private being chan for anyone."

Skipper covered her with her blanket. "Whatever the hell that means."

Her eyes drifted shut once more. "Mmmm, I can tell you never heard of fanfiction."

"Heard of it? Yes. Indulged in it? No."

"Your losssssss ---- z-z-z-z-z--zsnortgobble z-z-z-z--zngahj ngahj nnnn---- "

He turned off her light.

The march homewards became a stroll as he paraded in the moonlight. He ran his flipper over the bricks of the different habitats and thought of who he had told what to and why and then how and why and if he should tell Private. By Reilly's aces, Marlene was one zoo friend to trust. He didn't want to deal with others until he felt more secure in the changes that flipped his life from one axis to another.
Roy, for example. Roy was not a gossip, but Burt was, and Roy and Burt occupied habitats close together. Hmmm, the Reptile House could stay low on his radar because the chameleons, although they were perceptive little creatures, spoke only in code among themselves and to Maurice. Barry would keep his croaker shut or Skipper would shut it for him.

Skipper slapped his forehead. Maurice, and by extension, Ringtail! Loyalty to the King of the Lemurs always came first for Maurice, no matter that Maurice truly enjoyed his time as a quasi penguin commando. It would take manipulation to keep Maurice's tongue from babbling to Ringtail and Skipper wasn't sure he wanted to go that route. He did not do subtle well.

No, no, no, Skipper, Skipper thought, keep the blood pressure under control unless you're in battle. He breathed in through the left nostril five times and out the right five times as he plugged each in turn in a calming technique Rockgut had taught back when he still seemed sane. Julien perceived privacy as nobody else did, to put things charitably, and if he found out about Private and himself he'd want to party it up for days. There would be horns and dancing and castanets and confetti and more dancing and boomboxes and dancing partnered with Julien ---

"Skipper," said Kowalski's head from the hatch, "is Marlene coming?"

He'd brought himself back home without noticing. "Not this time."

Kowalski was jovial. "Too much action for the Action Girl?"

"Heh. Yeah. Well, maybe." He'd had a half-formed plan he called Operation: Facetime that Marlene would stay for the night, observe Private and him cuddling and then draw her own conclusions without asking questions. Tonight's visit with her would have to take that plan's place. He brightened when he saw Private plopped beside Rico to share his popcorn. At Private's poke, Rico produced another bag that Private shook at Skipper with many winks. Skipper didn't know he was smiling until he spooned against Private's warm back to watch men with sculpted chests and astounding martial arts skills bounce around the screen. He reached around to Private's front for some popcorn.

Kowalski brought his team drinks and the marathon began.

IOIOIOIOIO
"Moley, it's done. Originally, I planned to make several small pieces but then I caught on fire for a mini mecha sized one! Ten feet high by five by five, what do you think?"

The moonless December night shielded Moley's mecha's comings and goings near the back of the lot farthest from the sidewalk. The seventh of the month was the nearest to the conjoined feast of Chango and Saint Barbara when she had completed her metal sculpture. Technically, Moley could not have taken part in the feast at her godmother Felicity's home on the fourth. She didn't even know that he would have enjoyed the grilled meats and veggies which she delighted in. That part of her life remained private; he would not understand, just like she didn't understand his interest in her.

What stayed important was that the cowrie shell divination months ago that proved her path into Santeria was correct for her life strengthened her resolve to become a warrior. The chicken sacrifice for her initiation might be enough as it had been for Santeria's welcoming gift of her eleke, or was a pig more appropriate for the second stage in her faith? A bush pig, for instance, like good old Potamochoerus larvatus that she had introduced into Hoboken Zoo? Rumor had it that the naturally clean animal was cleaner than even the normal domesticated sort, but turned Berserker if its young were threatened. Surely a warrior animal sacrifice like that pleased Chango? Should she stick to the familiar bird sacrifices, such as another chicken or a pigeon or a dove? Her skimpy finances suggested a dove, because digesting a dove could be no stranger than digesting a chicken. She was pulled to the present by a subsonic rumble of approval by her admirer.

Moley regarded the piece that to Frances' eyes was perfectly imperfect. "Frawnces, it's explosive."

"Explosive, eh? I like that! I think. What do you mean it's explosive?"

He wrung his hands as he worked through his thoughts but she ignored the mannerism. "I say whash I mean, I, I, feel exploded. Torn up." He blinked rapidly behind his goggles. "My word frmkl says it best." He crossed his arms and she knew him well enough to figure he was done describing his impression. That was the problem with completely unknown languages; there was no dictionary to decode them, not even Urban Dictionary.

"Frmkl, all right, I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is." He gestured to the Mrsdm. "Ride with me now?"

"In a minute. Exploding can be a good thing, right? Explode the old, gain a new start with the new moon, and all that?" Moley understood her better after these months and didn't try to answer her rhetorical question. Frances admired the way that starlight gleamed on the polished copper, rich, subdued and tinged pink if she squinted. She stroked her work; she sniffed her fingers afterward, smelling the sage smoke that had swirled around it twenty minutes ago in a cleansing ritual. Moley patted her gold-streaked hair but she ignored it as she thought hard.

Celebratory new moon sage burning? Check. Updated hairstyle? Check. State of iré with its blessing of calm? Check. Moley stepped to her side and put his arm around her as would a brother. She remained still as his calloused palm rubbed her bicep. Genderblender stood as complete as she could make it. The old saying 'the hardest part of art is knowing when to quit' rang as true as ever. It had been hard to craft a copper tubing Osterizer. "Listen, Moley, it's my idea of sexual healing."

"Whash?"

_Never felt so happy and so fully alive_ came the bright lyrics from one of Mom's old songs. Frances
laughed, not Miss Frances' *hahahahaaaa* but Frances The Zookeeper's girlish giggle and teehee. "I mean that being creative is better than what you have with your harem." And what I have never experienced, at least all the way, she added to herself, not wanting to encourage him to suggest a more commonplace sort of initiation. "Come on, making art satisfies and metal sculptures, um, last." She tapped the metal to make a *clink*.

"If Frawnces says so, it must be so."

"Why, Moley, was that humor?"

"Krnpy."

"All right, don't translate that. I'm coming as soon as I find my GPS. That's human humor, by the way."

"Ozlr."

"You don't say." Frances felt around in the travel bag she carried each time she voyaged with her friend. The Samsung cell wasn't the latest, but it represented her last big splurge of spending when she was more solvent. Her year as an initiate enriched her spiritually as it impoverished her bank account. "Ah ha, here we go. This time I'm tracking how far we travel and in what direction. I wish my phone app was a tricorder, you know, record in three dimensions never mind why am I telling you this. Star Trek looks up and you look down, and I am down with that." She caressed her lavender and yellow beaded eleke in Oyá's honor, clattered her nine copper bracelets and chanted a moyugbar as softly as a balmy breeze. Oyá's presence could be sensed, in particular around the part of Funkytown where Frances collected her admissions.

Nearly ready, nearly ready ... what next? Oh yes, the dance to ask blessings on this voyage. Frances leaped like a marionette coming to life, her toes pointed as if at the barre of childhood's ballet lessons that Mom insisted upon. Mom wouldn't know what to make of Frances now if she lived, but since she was dead Frances took it for granted that death brought universal understanding, if not approval.

Frances purchased an iruke at the feast three days ago with a large percentage of her weekly earnings. Was it responsible spending? She didn't know anymore; the black horse's tail swirled as she whipped it in circles over her head. She gripped the wrapped handle and spun it counterclockwise, reversed it and as the bristles swished through the chill night, her spirit soared wild and free. As an aboricha, each time she practiced Santeria she felt more and more certain that she must take larger steps into deeper mysteries.

Moley waited by *Genderblender* like the altar in Frances' room, as if he were a still material thing that required invoked spirits to make it live. Whirling and leaping, snapping the iruke, Frances entreated Oyá to enter her head. Her leggings underneath her nine-banded skirt would drip with sweat when she was through and she was down with that, too.

For obscure reasons, Oyá desired to tease Moley and so Frances spun around him and her metal creation, squawking like the chicken had before Felicity cut its throat for Frances' initiation. Since the oricha blew changes into lives whether people wanted them or not, Frances leaped higher when she spotted Elegüá, Ogun, Oshosi and Osun, the warriors four, on the edges of her vision. Oyá nodded at them with Frances' head. Not yet, not yet, purred the oricha, you will receive them in due time. For now, your voyage underground out of my power will teach you limits. Aboricha, listen and learn.

When Frances came back to herself, Oyá had left her body face down with arms extended in full foribale. The recent rains left the ground moist so that the good earthy smell of wet soil penetrated to
clear her thoughts. Next came the realization that someone shook her shoulder.

"Uhhhhhhngah."

"Frawnces."

"Moley, give me a minute." Frances rolled over to spy the ruler of the Mole Men forming a black shape blotting out the stars. He was kneeling in the dirt, biding his time until she could rise. He was a good friend, she realized, and when he hefted both her elbows to help her stand, she allowed the touch. "I'm ready to leave when you are."

"Frawnces change clothes?"

Oh, of course. An impractical skirt and sweaty leggings made for discomfort in close quarters. Verbal teasing was too fun to pass up. "Are you saying I stink?"

"If Frawnces says so, it must be so."

Dancing left her joyous as well as wiped out and so she laughed. "As I said not so long ago, don't get so entranced with beauty that you forget practicality. Hand me my travel bag and then turn around, you turkey." He obeyed and turned to face Genderblender as she changed into stretchy brown corduroy slacks and turtleneck sweater to match. It wasn't until they reached halfway to Howe Caverns that she remembered how he stared into the coppery surfaces which would have reflected her image to his amazing darkness vision.

IOIOIOIOIOIO

"Frawnces not happy."

"Good call, Moley."

"We not go as far as brzdi so why Frawnces not happy?"

"I hate being stupid. My Samsung doesn't work underground, duh, so its stupid GPS doesn't work underground, duh."

"We saw other pretties."

"Yes, we did. Don't be disgruntled like me, Moley, because the one hundred foot waterfall underground truly was a wonderful spectacle."

"Did my best."

"Sure. It's not your fault that I described Howe Caverns and you took us to Secret Caverns not far from them. Something calls me to Howe and I think it's important."

"Why?"

"Here's the thing. My orichas many times leave thought-feelings that aren't specific. It's not like a religion is a GPS, Moley."

"Yphnk."

"I agree with the general thrust of that word. I think."

"Mngtut."
"I'm not hungry, thank you. It's Sunday the ninth, and it's late. I've missed a weekend's worth of business making this trip. I wouldn't have gone if the return date weren't the ninth, Oyá's special day."

"So?"

"Oh my friend, you don't know about money, so you don't know the demographic of my clientele, maaanaa. Weekenders having fun, divorced dads looking for a family friendly outing with their kids, and all that. Most of my funds come from two precious days per week. It's similar to when I was a zookeeper."

"Frawnnces complicated."

"If Moley says so, it must be true."

"Cmloop!"

"You got that right, brother. Jeff knows I live on the bubble and he's not nice like you are. I dislike living around him and being dependent on his shelter. He could kick me out."

"Klmfru?"

"No! Never! He's not worth making a murderer out of anybody! I'll deal with my life, and hey the Christmas break is coming up, which is always good. I'll make January rent, I'm confident."

"Shzbsh, Frawnnces."

"You're a good friend to say I can live with you. I might, who knows? The orichas are silent on many things. For now, I wish to keep a little bit of my old life and some keepsakes from Mom --- "

"Bring."

"Her walnut seven foot tall glassed in china hutch and collection of antique antimacassars? Not practical, my friend. Don't pout."

"Not."

"Let's not go there again, Moley. Here we are, home again, home again, jiggety jig. I'll open the airlock to the Moon Rocket. Too bad nobody is here tonight. It's a dab of fun to leap up in front of folks and make them guess where I came from."

IOIOIOIOIO
"So this is different than our regular submersive combat trainin', Skippa?" Private thought he knew all there was to holding the breath underwater, but it appeared he was wrong. From being over the moon about his romance to seeing a bad moon rising took only a moment. It was going to be one of those days when he felt inferior to all his teammates, he could tell. The lesson would take hold if he could concentrate on the last Lunacorns show starring Princess Self-Respectra and how she dealt like a boss with body shape issues. He recalled the life lesson *Be easy in your skin* and felt better.

Kowalski surfed a wave of nostalgia as he regarded Private. The bird whom he'd seen hatch was fully adult, bloomed in a relationship and was a topnotch commando, to boot. The baby fuzz of innocence on body and mind had departed forever. He brought himself to reality with an effort. It was time to instruct and he placed himself in Skipper's easy reach to Private's curious look. He produced his clipboard and drew rapidly on it as Skipper wrapped a companionable flipper around the junior team member's shoulders. They were all three so close together that Kowalski observed Private growing uneasy with shy looks downward. Well, the lesson called for closeness and it certainly was not as intimate as demonstrating rescue breathing, so the young bird would need to deal. He harrumphed and flourished the finished program under Private's beak.

"These show the progression of our lesson's sitches, Private. See?"

Private beheld eight small sketches of various familiar scenes. He nodded and traced their path in a clockwise fashion. "Like this, then?"

"Yes, we'll tour the zoo, our home, and nearby Manhattan, plus a surprise for you, Private. That's the theme, right, Skipper?"

Skipper made a pouty face that he usually reserved for his and Private's alone times. Private didn't know what to make of the way that Kowalski's eyes gleamed in memory and was about to ask when Skipper grumbled, "Aw, Kowalski! You were supposed to make him guess! You ruined it!" He crossed his flippers, uncrossed them and then took Private's head between them. "Forget what he said and figure it out on your own, 'kay?" His voice got that husky tone, again a personal thing between them that was on display in front of Kowalski. Something unpleasant roiled in Private's gut, and he pushed it down.

Skipper nuzzled the edge of Private's beak before gently edging him to the side to make room for Kowalski. Private threw an uncertain look at his love and his love's lieutenant. They seemed eager to present this lesson for some reason.

"It's better than regular training, it's outstanding, young Private. I don't know why we haven't done this demonstration before. Kowalski, take over." Skipper pushed down the memories of nearly drowning in Shanghai Bay. Blowhole's mindjacker stole memories of his training in the technique, which was yet another reason to hate the fiend.

Kowalski put on his professorial face and passed his clipboard to Private. He prepared himself to teach, centering himself as he had since the beginning of his lieutenancy. Manfredi and Johnson, oh if only they had been able to use this technique to save their lives ... perhaps they did to give themselves extra minutes of life before the tsunami sucked them under to steal them away from their secured place as Skipper's favorites ... "Ahem. Onward, Private. Let's get with the program. Watch and learn. Follow along as best you can."

Kowalski gripped Skipper by the elbows, entering his commander's personal space by a factor of one
half. Skipper dropped his usual aware look for a blank expression and Kowalski followed a moment later, swaying on his feet, left right left right left right now in.

Skipper began as was his practice.

"Hommmm...mayohbeebeeemmmmmooohooooohahhhhh."

So, 'home' remained their theme this time and Kowalski wouldn't need to deal with a last minute changeup. A good start, and then he tempered his lyrical baritone to press on in a subdued fashion, holding Skipper's elbows as lightly as Kitka had when Kowalski chanced to see them waltz together. "Ibbleibbleblihehehehehehehehehohohohohoh." They built a rhythm as only two penguins could, creating circular breathing patterns of nonsense vocalizations, simultaneously working in control and release, throats pulsing as Skipper tilted his beak submissively to Kowalski's greater height.

If Private didn't know better after his last physical, he'd say he had ulcers because his stomach burned to see the two of them in this pose.

Kowalski bent over, his flippers guiding Skipper like Skipper had guided Kitka in their dance. Between them was a continuous growl, a base undertone that fluttered primally as a susurrus of wave and ocean wind.

Private couldn't tell where the growl originated; it was from either or both or from something he could not name. He leaned in. I've never seen them this close. Look how they're swayin' together, rockin' like we did on the poor dyin' horse. And their breathin', it's like they are one penguin! Can I ever do this? And who with? After a glance at the program's outline on Kowalski's clipboard, he pictured the scenarios painted by two communing penguins as they composed a narrative off the cuff. Or was it something they had sung in tandem before Private had become aware of the way of a penguin with a penguin? He pushed aside speculation and studied the scrawly yet identifiable poses of the two older birds.

Private sniffed. Kowalski thought he was so good at bloody everything, well Marlene could give him lessons in sketching.

IOIOIOIOIO

Down the Museum of Natural History's steps:

raprapraprap

IOIOIOIOIO

Skipper broke the theme with a flashback for effect, and then the two birds alternated phrases as their song built to a duet. Private broke the serious aspect with a wink at Skipper when he recognized the course of flashbacked events. Skipper paid no mind.

Soaring from the cliff top of their Antarctica home onto the wine-dark sea when they first met Private:

========================

IOIOIOIOIO

Alice slopping along with smelt slipsliding around in her food bucket:
Their habitat at noontime after the bucket upended over their island:

The weapons lab with Hans firing laser gun and then neutrino blaster after some weapon-they-never-found-out-the-name-for:

On top of the zoo clock:

Trooping down the steps to their lair:

Now the lesson built intensity. Private's own breathing picked up the pace, his fledgling technique only barely keeping him from hypoxia. He swayed with them, feeling his diaphragm shudder with strain. Two minutes, or was it three now? He watched closely, seeing how they focused completely on each other, in the mutual bond of being of like ages and of taking command. Well, he had commanded, too, but it was only for the one Winky Factory mission. The two of them produced a continuous tone by breathing in through the nose and at the same time pushing air out through the beaks. The technique was more difficult than it appeared.

Come to think of it, Kowalski and Skipper disagreed more than he'd ever thought commander and lieutenant ought to. Skipper's command style generally allowed little leeway and Private was okay with that. Had Kowalski and Skipper been closer at one time so that Kowalski felt spoiled, in a sense, by his commander's individual attention and so dared to talk back frequently now? What had happened between them when they both tied one on with Gammel Dansk? Was there --- Private faltered at a rumbling brain fart --- experimenting by Kowalski and his superior officer?

Private's mind stuttered to life again. A breathing exercise lesson, he could understand; their intimate song, he could not. It was going someplace where he chose to neither wander nor wonder today and so he tucked it away to think about later.

He could live with that.

Skipper entered his lieutenant's personal space by one more third. He was using Kowalski's mouth as a resonating chamber, his beak nearly kissing Kowalski's, his eyes closed in concentration as he swayed in perfect synchrony with his second. Next, Kowalski blew through the corner of Skipper's
beak to ruffle the fine drift of white feathers there, turning this lesson into one of mutual need and use.

I shouldn't be seeing this, Private thought. The pace increased, the sounds deeper, almost a moan. He couldn't tell whose turn it was, the theme of home, our HQ shuttling back and forth between them. Home. Our HQ. Where we are happy together. He stopped following then, stockstill and panting, and made himself watch and learn as two birds communed in perfect harmony. It seemed to take forever for the lesson, and yet here was the last segment.

IOIOIOIOIO

**Our shared quarters at midnight when everyone is sleeping.**

ohooooohohohohesssessunghunghunghugnnnnnahhhhhhhahhhahhhahh

Private homed in on the final sequence on the program because he sensed that these events took place before he was aware of subtleties and subtexts. He caught his breath, shook his head, and again mimicked his two elders at a respectful distance, swaying and breathing in their wake as best he could.

This was going to give him a sore throat, he just knew it.

Rico's presence pinged upon his awareness and he whirled. There Rico was, poking his head through the fish plaque door and grinning, shaking his head in wonder, and then he saw what Private was doing. Marlene and he entered the lair. Rico gave a jaunty flipper up and continued towards the lab, saying something to Marlene who observed the goings on more soberly. Marlene's regard lingered on Skipper and then she swept away at Rico's side, back to laughing at something or other as they closed the lab door behind them.

Private turned once more to his friends. Rico and Marlene's interloping must have jarred their concentration or perhaps they came to a natural climax of the lesson, for they were fitted together like two opposing spoons, Skipper's forehead on Kowalski's collarbone and Kowalski's flipper snuggling his leader's back. They hugged before parting with a hearty laugh.

Private knew the lesson was complete. He chuckled a little at himself, because to admit that their non-melodic tunes deepened his melancholy would serve no purpose. Skipper, bless him, would not understand this any more than he did himself. He spent a moment being thankful for that. There were times when he preferred to keep his sensitivities to himself. Having a foible known to the team and having to talk about it did not help the weakness go away. It was more like reliving events.

"Erm. Uh. So it's like a game?"

The two commandos senior to him began together, as if still team teaching. "No, babe, it's singing, you see ---"

"Private, the Inuit technique comes from the farthest tundras of ---"

"Remember when we kept it up for hours, Kowalski, when we were, uh, that time, I mean --- " Skipper stopped suddenly and clapped Kowalski on the back. "You finish the lesson, *mi terroncito de azúcar.*" He bent forward a little to rearrange his belly feathers, twisting and smoothing that which had gotten infinitesimally out of order. Kowalski mirrored his skipper's motions. This bred a pause, a diagnostic of their relationship past and present that sizzled between them to Private's newly matured, discerning view, and then Kowalski cleared his throat to continue the lesson.

"I think that *circular throat-singing* is the best translation from the Inuit. It's a technique, Private, for simply hold your breath longer to reach the surface. Capturing air in the lungs and then the mouth
and nasal passages lets you stay alive longer, and that's the name of the game, right?"

Skipper sobered. "Survival is the first rule." Private didn't need to be a mind reader to know that he was remembering nearly drowning in Shanghai Bay.

"You two really enjoyed your game, didn't you?" Private was appreciative, he was, but as the lesson wore on, they had forgotten about him, he could tell. That was all right. They were leaders of varying strengths and he was not. He had to get away, to think about what he had learned from them. "You'll find me in my bunk. Thank you for the lesson, Skippa. And K'walski."

He smiled as if nothing had changed between them, and perhaps it hadn't where it counted.

IOIOIOIOIO
The leaves from the conifers in Central Park stayed as stubbornly on their branches as ever the evening before Kidsmas. Leaf litter from less hardy trees blanketed all Central Park as the year drew to a close while the penguin quartet found bliss day after day. It was true, Skipper mused as he and Private snuggled after an outdoor interlude in Hallett Nature Preserve, that commando life offered advantages over smiling-and-waving nine to five. It was rather like being a fireman because fires remained unpredictable and yes, lulls in action meant that the firehouse was not without drama that is part and parcel of life, just without its lifethreatening crises. The unexpected could crop up at any time, however.

"Skippa, life gets better and better." Private snuggled his hip to the top of Skipper's head as he plotzed beside his tuckered out commander.

Skipper got his breath back. "Here now, don't get sappy on me. Thanks for the sitrep, though." It was time to praise. "And hey, you're getting better and better at what you did just now."

"Mmmm. Yummytummy." Private ran his tongue around the rim of his beak. There had been kisses above and below with Skipper finishing down Private's welcoming throat.

"Er, that's nice. Also nice are the soothing sounds of the children of the night" --- an owl hooted --- "and the fact that we two are not present in the HQ tonight when Rico blasts out a King-Sized bed as a Kidsmas gift for Kowalski."

"Where did K'walski get to, then?"

"He went to ask the squirrel monkeys for gift giving advice. Whatever he gives you tomorrow, Private, be diplomatic. It's good for your commando training."

Private plucked a broken feather from Skipper's head. "When am I not?"

"Questioning Rico's loyalty to the team two weeks ago after he came back to his senses was not. You can't blame him for kabooming his little heart out for forty-eight hours straight when Ringtail pressured him. Rico is delicate in some ways," Skipper squirmed. "Enough with the preening."

"We made our own kabooms for our gifts to each other this evenin', honey."

Skipper slapped Private's thigh at one hundred fiftieth his strength in reply.

"It's quiet," Skipper said after awhile.
"Too quiet?"

"Nah. Just right."

The season’s chill notwithstanding in this winter that some would later call Nosnowmaggeddon, privacy gained by a brief break from HQ had been just the ticket for a pleasurable hour. In the underbrush skirting a shaggy barked tree, Skipper and Private counted three comes among two penguins, a nice ending for the lazy day. No guests to entertain, no Alice because at 6 p.m. she had bundled herself into a taxi after she bundled herself in an unflattering bulky coat and boots to go celebrate someplace, the penguins supposed. There remained the mystery of Marlene’s warning, but thus far nothing critical erupted from the grouchy zookeeper. Her appearance had changed a trifle, that was all. Nobody knew why and honestly, Skipper pushed away speculation as he relaxed in his Happy Place.

A Christmas truce prevailed between the penguins and known enemies such as the rats. Skipper supposed the prolonged absence of Hans and Blowhole could mean that those losers, too, celebrated in their own way. It wasn't worth thinking about reasons for peace, sometimes.

"Hist! Do you hear that, Skippa?"

Skipper sat up. "Hist? What the what now?"

"Sorry, I’ve been thinkin’ about Shakespeare In The Park and Midsummer Night's Dream romance and all. The play is in a forest like this one, you know."

"Never mind, what were you histing about?" Then he heard it.

*ttrummmmmpkshgrrrrr

"Hang about, wot --- "

Skipper clamped his love's beak shut as the impossible happened. The earth cracked open to rip a trench from the tree they relaxed behind to rend a copse of American holly trees thirty feet away. Kowalski would have insisted upon calling them bushes. The two birds sneaked closer, rolling covertly on top of the flaky bark through the prickly holly leaves to press themselves upright in an attack stack behind the narrow holly trunk, Skipper providing the base.

A metal snout studded with leaf-shaped excavators pointed skyward from the copse. A *hssssss* steamed its way upward like when Blowhole's gigantamundo sea bubble sub demolished the pier in Shanghai. What had followed then was the bottlenose’s mindjacker treatment and a disoriented plunge into waters that came close to drowning Skipper. Private’s presence on his shoulders reminded the commander that this was not a solo mission and the burden of leadership to
Skipper gave the signal for Routine Four: Scout Ahead I'll Catch Up Later as he shrugged to shed the weight of his beloved burden and indicated the way back to the zoo. He bellyslid closer to surveille from under the outermost spray of prickly branches this unbelievable happening without looking to see if Private obeyed. He felt a familiar presence at his side and turned to glare at his disobedient soldier. Dammit, one of them needed to report with this intel! He drew back for a full-on slap, saw that Private didn't flinch, and stayed his flipper. An angry growl escaped his beak as he turned back to the whatever-it-was.

A zombie vaulted from the open hatch of a digger the size of a U-Haul truckbed for moving a human's one bedroom home or two bedroom apartment. Skipper's and Private's eyes bugged out when a hunched over human, or former human, wearing goggles and a heavy brown duster like Eastwood wore in The Good, The Bad and the Ugly stepped forward three paces to scout the terrain before returning to the hatch. Knurled was a la dee dah word Kowalski used once and Skipper thought that it fit this misshapen man. Bulbous nose, gnarled hands, crabwalk --- surely this invasion began the mutant zombie apocalypse.

Bring it on. Battle plans formed immediately: Rico as Ordnance, Kowalski as Intel, himself as Command and Private as ... Inspiration? Business as usual. Two feet sporting a kind of shoe that Skipper had never before seen edged inches from their hiding spot and the commander once again gestured Routine Thirty: Attack Stack. He waddled backwards towards the trunk with Private topping like the holiday tree angel he was.

Something else unbelievable happened a woman using her cell phone as a flashlight alit from the hatch, handed down to solid ground in a gentlemanly way by the zombie.

It was Frances Alberta. Her voice sounded little different from their battle in Hoboken, except her appearance was anything but Bureaucrat-On-The-Fast-Track-To-Middle-Management. Her lavender hair was striped like Marty The Zebra's with golden streaks. She had a tat on the back of her hand. She looked funky.

"Hickory nuts Felicity wants for the feast tomorrow and hickory nuts she'll have. She's worth pleasing, don't you think?"

What the Monitor and Merrimac? Skipper's night vision was among the best of his species. He searched the base of the nearby trees. More hickory nuts not gobbled by Fred or his friends dotted the layers of fluffy bark that had formed a delightful bed.

The strong phone light bobbed over the ground, but the zombie indicated an area not within the illuminated cone. "Blintz, Frwnces. There." The eldritch horror pointed at a cluster of nuts not four feet away from the penguins. Skipper and Private pressed tighter against the trunk. Private's claws clenched through Skipper's feathers down to the meat of each shoulder, but he withstood the trickle of blood stoically.
Shit, the zombie was right on about the nuts because he owned night vision like an animal's. What was Frances Alberta doing with him? Since when did zombies travel underground in mecha? Did Frances Alberta and Moley connive an evil scheme to cleanse the animals in the entire Five Boroughs? Skipper rattled off question after question in a mental checklist.

Frances prattled and Skipper had never figured her for a prattler; he concluded she was different in ways other than her voice. "So, Moley, I'm grateful to Godmother Felicity for not insisting I wear white and stay inside at night for an entire year as an initiate, I mean the year is up in two months but you know, my work works b-better if I can be Miss Cleo in her colorful outfits and headdress and sometimes" --- she bent to gather more nuts --- "well, I am an initiate almost ready to meet and greet the Warriors but still a beginner and she's kind to me, sort of like a mom, and she said, she said that I was confusing my own thoughts with Oyá's when I danced because orichas never communicate in words and and and it's a common initiate error ---"

"Frawnces. Zplp."

"Huh?"

The zombie put his hand on Frances' mouth. "Zplp."

After swiveling 360 degrees with a piercing glance, the zombie named Moley sniffed like Rico did in his astounding tracking ability. Skipper's heart froze underneath the scar on his chest. They'd be captured or killed, him and Private right when they were happiest. He tensed and Private's rigid body communicated the same battle-ready stance. The young penguin's claws dug deeper as Skipper used the pain to stoke his judo mojo.

The next five minutes ached unbearably. Skipper's pride in Private soared into the ionosphere as the young penguin held his position. When the zombie sighed and relaxed and Frances Alberta spoke again, Skipper paid extra attention to her words.

They dripped with sincerity. "You're looking out for me, my friend. Thank you. Nobody except lovers or family is supposed to touch me for a year, too, but you, my friend, are something different. Santeria doesn't have a name for it." Skipper heard humility and affection, too. As the two humans resumed nut gathering, he could tell they weren't intimate because there was not that special vibe that he'd discerned among couple after couple. But they were companions somehow, and he concluded the zombie named Moley was not a zombie after all. He missed Rico's keen sense of smell and Kowalski's analysis of it, because Moley did not smell one hundred percent human, either.

"So, um, I might be moving in with you soon, but I don't know yet. January 3rd is the last day of grace before my rent is officially overdue and that jerk Jeff will dump out my things onto the street on the 14th because he legally can. Asshole. How I'd love to command Oyá's army to run him out of town. Dickwad."

The whatever-he-was named Moley spoke in an agreeing tone. "Wnkr." He passed his handful of
nuts to Frances as she opened her bag to his reach.

Frances took a break from using her phone as a flashlight as she checked its content. "My *Genderblender* Weapon of Mass Disruption made Instagram and Facebook and other sites. I'm banking on that upping the business finances, my friend. If not --- "

"Shzbsh, Frawnces."

"Living with you wouldn't be the end of the world, I guess."

"Pzm."

"Don't pout, I didn't mean it like that --- "

"Did."

"Have it your own way then, O Ruler of the Mole Men. I did mean it. Try to see things from my point of view, it's like you're Pluto and I'm Proserpina --- "

"Not."

"Hear me out --- "

Now she was calling him a dog. Skipper blotted their squabble from his mind in this onslaught of intel. Mole Men invading the Greater New York City environs, possibly including Long Island? The creatures were not tiny as previous intel stated, although they were short within the human adult range of height. Kowalski could eyeball measure better than he could; in Skipper's estimate, Moley was four foot ten. What army strength did the two have, and why invade at all? This specimen appeared pussywhipped by Frances Alberta. Did he feel he had to prove something to her? It wouldn't be the first time in human or animal history.

And what about the intel that Frankie spilled the day after Thanksgiving? Skipper had been positive the obnoxious pigeon was playing him, but the *Genderblender*? A code name if ever he heard one.

" --- the trouble with you, Moley, is that --- " Gah, they were still at it. Skipper's battle mind dismissed Frances Alberta as an immediate threat because one kick to knock her phone away and she'd be blind; the unknown danger was Moley, whose vision in dark places loomed formidably in the gloom, and then there was his mecha containing mystery after mystery.

" --- Frawnces Frawnces Frawnces --- " Ugh. End it already, man, or make her walk home. The sting from Private's claws grew. Frances' copper bracelets clattered when she cobbled together the
last of her hickory nut collection with quick, angry movements. Whatever differences she had had with her friend seemed to have reached a stopping point, or maybe they agreed to disagree.

Gobbledygook ensued as Skipper tried to make sense of her next words. "Oyá's army is made of the spirits of the dead, Moley, and she uses violent winds to blow away her enemies. I invoke her aid in my plan by shaking a framboyán seedpod."

Skipper relaxed. Spirits of the dead and seedpods to call up a big wind sounded nuttier than a plan from Blowhole's sicko psyche. They came all this way to gather nuts, and that was nutty, too. She was a nutter, to quote a Private-ism, so her comeuppance must have fractured her think melon like Skipper's broken flippers that time when his team believed him to be a zombie. Frankie was right to call her a nutso.

"Ungwa."

"All right, I've got enough hickory nuts to feed an army alive or dead so yes, let's go. No, wait, I want to foribale to thank Oyá. This soft shagbark hickory sluff is perfect to lie on."

"Shag?"

"It's just a word, Moley. That's the kind of tree this big one is, a shagbark hickory tree. Stop laughing. A foribale is a serious go."

Private trembled as a giggle slid out, making the commander grit his beak. The bleeding threatened to start up again. He smacked Private's foot, making another sting but stopping the giggles. Outbursts like this reminded Skipper that Private was on the youngish side to be his lover. Shagbark was just bark. Now if this tree grew needles --- he nipped that image in the bud.

Choked sounds came from above as Skipper peeked around the bole of the tree to see Frances Alberta lie on her left side with right arm crooked with Moley as a curious onlooker. She flipped like a Mickey Mouse pancake over to her left side to face the trunk of the holly tree. Skipper and Private froze in Routine Six: Play Statue.

"I'm done. I've called Oyá to attend the feast and make her army persuade more customers visit Funkytown. I've done all that I can."

"Frawnces go."

"Let's do that little thing. Bring my bag."

IOIOIOIOIO
"Sir, it's midnight, so Merry Christmas!"

"Aw, Kowalski, you shouldn't have."

"Do you like it?"

"I've never seen anything this pink and plastic! Thanks. Here's your gift."

"Incense to burn in the latrine. How thoughtful."

"Yeah, Private pitched in to brainstorm what would really show you that we two know and, and appreciate your qualities. It's sandalwood. Six cones."

"Mmmhhmmm. Private, do you like your gift from Rico and me?"

"I'm over the moon, K'walski! Really! They match my showercap!"

"Clogskeepfeetysdry."

"Yes, they do, Rico, right as rainbows, and I'm ever so glad to see you nibblin' your salmon. Well. Night, all. Enjoy your new wider bunk, you two."

"Team, tomorrow's Kidmas, so we need to rest up for entertaining the park's kidlets. Lights out."

"Sir, first come over to the porthole, allow me to show you what your gift does when it's nearer to water ---"

"Roger. Uh, I'm looking, Kowalski. The little witch is supposed to come out of her house when it's humid, right?"

"You got it in one but that's not what I want to discuss."

"Shoot, compadre."

"Rico and Private have turned in, so let's speak quietly."

"Is this another time travel dilemma with three Kowalskis, because I'm so not in the mood for a time travel mashup ---"
"Sir, the story you told about Frances Alberta and a tunneler mecha driven by a zombie, that wasn't really the truth, was it."

"You're saying that not in question form. Hell, yes, Kowalski, it was the truth."

"A tunneler with fan-shaped blades that hissed and hummed and steamed is classic steampunk fantasy. Right out of a comic book, if you get my drift."

"Aw, I don't understand what I heard yet and I know it sounds whackadoo --- "

"Sir, I spotted blood on your feathers when you and Private returned. Are you certain the story wasn't Routine Thirty-Two: Confuse and Distract for Rico and me after your, er, activities?"

"It washed off easy and hell, I didn't want to rub it in Private's face in front of you two that he attack stacked me and grabbed too hard. The sitch got intense. Damn, seeing Frances Alberta again shook me up, too."

"So you two aren't, um, experimenting with outré sexual --- "

"I'm going to forget you said that. Blood and sex have no place near each other. I never thought I'd have to make a damned routine out of common sense, shit, Kowalski, you and your imagination --- "

"Apologies, sir. It's a big ugly world out there."

"That's not allowed in our HQ."

"No."

"We stand in agreement, then. Lights out, computer."

"QUERY: FOR REALS THIS TIME?"

"Smarta--- "

"Don't teach it words you don't want to hear again, sir."

"Okayokay."
"Happy New Year, Marlene."

"Hey, Skipper, yeah it's only Epiphany so I can say that back at you."

Skipper indicated the beach loungey chair next to his. "Beautiful wintry day, am I right? Borderline perfecto! I'll only tell you that no snow this season is a refreshing change so far."

She had to smile. "You're in a good mood." She sat to bask in clear noon sunlight. "Who's home?"

"I am topside, Kowalski lurks in his lab and the boys are out teaching Roger how to throat sing. He says it'll add to his repertorium. It'll also let him stay underwater longer than a gator's usual half hour."

Marlene absorbed the term. "Throat sing? What's that?"

A gleam sparked from Skipper's soul to his eyes to hers. "Sure you want to know?" He patted her knee. "It's intense."

"Yeah, well, I could use an intense something in my life." She squeezed his flipper before brushing away his touch.

Skipper shrugged. "You seemed a little off when splashing triple somersault dives for the kidlets at Kidsmas. Boredom is the worst thing I hope ever happens to you."

"Dear heart, like Pinkie says, it ain't no thang. I'll live." She soaked in more sun in a lazy afternoon refreshingly free from school groups touring to gape at animals. After a score of minutes, she opened her eyes to find him studying her. "What?"

"You don't have the gollywobbles by any chance, do you, Marlene?"

"I'm feeling fairly decent, no butterflies in the stomach, thank you. I had the usual breakfast and the usual lunch, blah blah. I'm not unwell. Same-o, same-o, day after d---"

Skipper leaned over to pucker her lips with a deft touch. "Breathe in, exhale until you can't anymore, then push up with the diaphragm to get that last bit of air out through your nose. Get more air through the mouth. Do it now." He burned his will into hers as he firmed his grip. "Now."

She had nothing better to do that afternoon. "Hmmmmmmnnowhwhiwhihowtch."

"Shouldn't hurt if you do it right, now watch me." Skipper whistled a breath in deeply, exhaled slowly and closed his beak, diving into her eyes with a piercing stare. The air kept coming out and coming out through his nostrils but somehow he had more air to continue making the sound that Marlene couldn't describe except as a growl. He opened his beak to make oooohs and hahhahs; the noises resembled Ted grunting as he hauled his 1,500 pounds out on his habitat's shoreline.

Marlene rubbed her stomach. "It hurts right here."

Skipper placed his flippers on top of her paws. "Always clockwise, Ms. Otter."

"Clockwise you looking at me or me looking down at me clockwise, I don't get it --- " The zoo clock chimed noon to emphasize the situation.
"Hush. Your right side over to your left and then back like this, now relax." His brawn could be tempered to the gentlest thing, she thought as the griping in her gut diminished. She didn't want him to stop.

Skipper stopped. "Better now?"

No, do it till the cows come home, she thought but what came out was, "Still twinging, can you keep it up a minute?"

"Seguro." He rubbed a timeless time until he jerked back. "Sorry! Didn't mean to do that!"

She looked down at herself. The massage had parted the fur over her third and fourth nipples so they perked upwards like the dimples in the meringue on a freshly baked lemon pie. "It's nothing, Skipper. I don't feel anything like what you might think. But hey, it's better now so thanks." She brushed her front smooth again. "How're things with you and Private?"

"We're good. Well, um, still want to learn if we start over and do it right?" The zoo had been quiet over the holidays, no crises, nothing weird about Alice to report from Penny or herself, so could he be bored even if in a smoking hot love affair?

She nodded. "Okay, if it doesn't hurt. Er, it wasn't exactly my stomach but my diaphragm started to ache. And you call this singing?"

"Phil found a documentary a long time ago on YouTube showing Inuits in a competition, mostly females of young age, which you are. Two ladies get really up close and personal. They like doing it." He stood and gestured to her. "Mason, Phil, and we penguins liked watching them do it."

She stood a foot in front of her chair while sighing, "I'm not so young, Skipper."

"Compared to what?" He stretched left and then right, again jerking his chin at her to do likewise.

A few hardy insects wintering over buzzed on the faux floe in search of sustenance as she mirrored him. "Oh, I don't know. A mayfly, I guess, because having to get in a whole lifetime in one day must suck big time."

"Humph. Marlene, get your game face on." She couldn't until he knocked his forehead against hers in a softened gorbals kiss. "Wake up, lady."

Okay, she'd agreed to do this and she wanted to believe it would help her. "Go for i--- " He advanced toe to toe with her, grasped her elbows and invaded her space. She blinked as he swayed, pulling her into shifting weight along with him. She clutched his elbows to keep balanced as she tried again.

"Hooohahhhheeeehooo."

"Mmmmmhahahahahasssmmm --- "

"Sssshhhllllshshshshs."

Marlene gasped, "Out of air, gotta stop --- "

"Push it out through the nose, lift up with the diaphragm, suck air into the mouth, sing along with me I believe in you and you can do this --- " and then she was. Sure, she'd hurt later but the intensity of the session made it worthwhile. She felt alive doing this with him, well a bit more than this morning after a restless night.
"Dinginghuhhuhhuhup."

"Huphuphupahpahhuphup."

"Grrrrrrrhuphuhuuhuhuhuhuh --- "

She got into the spirit and swiveled her hips, angling him back and forth as the music poured out of the both of them. By the time they finished their half dance, her throat ached and she needed to rest.

Skipper's voice was raspy. "Good job, Ms. Otter. Another time we might pick a theme like, I don't know, the clock or something --- "

"Dingdingdingbuzzzzgetupgetupgetup?" She matched him for hoarseness.

He smiled. "Okay."

The sun felt warmer, the insects buzzed louder and oh look, a group of kids on holiday vacation, complete with extended family. She croaked out, "Catch you later, Leader Man," and vanished down the hatch to check up on Kowalski.

IOIOIOIOIO

Marlene's greeting set Kowalski's nurturing instinct atwitter. "Sore throat, Marlene?"

"Yeah, a little. Skipper taught me throat singing."

Kowalski stopped cold from opening a brown medicinal-looking bottle with a red X on its side. "H-He did? My stars and garters, did you like doing it with him?"

"Sure. He's good at whatever he does." She eyed the bottle. "Meds for a sore throat, huh? Dose me, Science Guy."

Kowalski muttered to himself as he opened the bottle. "Here, take a slug."

Marlene did. "'S thik. Whuzinnit?"

"Coal tar."

"Whaaaaaa?"

Kowalski looked smug. "Coal tar produces acetaminophen, the painkiller. This is uncut stuff without any fillers, I wouldn't give you anything to hurt you, really, Marlene, you were like whaaaaaaa --- "

Marlene swallowed five times before speaking. "Okay now. Ahem."

"Throat better?"

"Yeah, actually. Thanks." Marlene zeroed in on the reason for the visit. "What did you need me for in the last week of Advent?"

The smug look turned smugger. "I needed your input because I like you better than Pinkie, Shelly, or any five of the spider monkey females put together."

"That's flattering. I think."
Kowalski led the way to the far end of his lab table and pointed down.

There are pretty, delicate pinks and there are slimy, moldy pinks with no redeeming social value. Such was the pink of a culture in a Petri dish. Seven gray brown discs seemed to pulse atop the pustulous bubblegum pinkness as Marlene watched. She suppressed a shudder.

"Kowalski, are you sure this is safe to be around? I mean, I can almost see tentacles rising from it ---
"

"Marlene, the odds are 96.14 percent against tentacles forming from this culture. It's only three weeks old. Give it until five weeks, then you may be on to something." The scientist replaced the cover on the dish, to Marlene's relief. He'd sprinkled green dots onto the half of the mass of agar not covered in mold. "Spirulina, the purest form I could find."

"Why did you ask Rico to gather anybody's spit? This isn't going to be a hawking contest, is it, because the burping contest was bad enough to give nightmares. Never again."

Kowalski's grin was of the type known as cheesy. "You're important to my next major experiment, Marlene. I am isolating the female principle for intensive study." He turned back to the Bunsen burner. "Flame on!" he crowed, to be considered a hip penguin.

Marlene's brow dipped as she ignored his sally. "That's not possible."

"So they said about all world class scientists, Copernicus, Edison, and the fellow who invented velcro. Open your mind, 'Eenie."

The noise that Marlene made next sounded like something Rico produced after cauliflower floret snacks, but it was only a bppppbt between mobile otter lips. "I will if you promise to keep an eye on the culture with my input in it. I don't want to be responsible for The Attack of the Fifty Foot Otter." Kowalski nodded primly and she sighed. "My mind isn't my problem, 'Ski. It's --- It's ---"

"What's the matter? Dr. Phil says to acknowledge --- "

Marlene twiddled with a retort until Kowalski took it from her paws. She turned the Bunsen burner petcock up and down to make his decoction bubble up until Kowalski slapped her digits and then she came back from wherever her mood had kidnapped her. "It's taken me awhile to figure out. I'm done flowering."

"You're a plant? Now that is truly impossible. I'm going out on a limb and branch out into a theory tree that, that --- ummm ---"

Marlene chuckled, which was Kowalski's aim. "You nut. Haw haw haw, I said nut! But well, yes, I'm going through a reflective time and when I looked into my pond this morning, guess what I saw?"

Kowalski dug deep for what he assumed his friend needed to hear. "A pond that reflected a charming otter with lovely waterproof fur that needs an efficient preening by someone like me who knows how." Marlene turned to him in surprise and he quoted Dr. Phil desperately. "One side of unhealthy relating is if you are always pursuing or always retreating."

"Oh relax, I wasn't hinting about you and me." She patted his shoulder. "But thanks for the compliment. Nobody has preened me in a very long time." She looked sideways as his eyes grew round. "And I know that you know that I know you know what I mean by preened me."

Kowalski hemmed and hawed. "As your fellow animal past puberty, yes I do. I'm sor---"
She placed her paw over his beak. "Don't be. It's just one of those things. I'm done flowering, no new caves to explore, no virgin streams to fish in. I could go on and on, but Penny said not to because I depressed her since she feels the same way when she isn't working. She lost her sister, you know the horse who collapsed in the Park with you guys on her? She gets down sometimes."

"Maybe you want to talk with Private about this? He's a good listener." Kowalski turned off the burner until he was again alone in his lab. Hot subjects and hot emotions made him uncomfortable as hot sulfuric acid in a test tube.

Marlene drummed her digits on the work table. "I've scalded you with my steam and that's enough venting. Have fun with my spit, in a scientific way. If you discover an answer about the female principle, don't keep it to yourself, 'Ski. Tell me first."

IOIOIOIOIO
"Put it there, by Genderblender." Frances kept it together as Moley emerged from the shadows. "Jeff did me a favor and dropped it off here, I don't know why because he could have dumped it with New Jersey trash or sold it --- "

A Manhattanite strode purposefully by, avoiding eye contact with someone whose body language screamed of distress. A couple strolling hand in hand in the opposite direction paused upon seeing one man attempting to lift a large burden. The woman gestured to her companion to help, but a curt fingersnap from the figure pushed away any assistance. The couple went on their way, wrapped in a private bubble.

Moley hefted the piece of furniture made of solid wood from the sidewalk to the interior of Funkytown's lot in an impressive show of strength, but Frances missed the sight when her vision blurred. She groped in the box of treasured hutch contents to place them on shelves.

"Frawnces not cry."

"I c-can't help it, Moley. Oyá doesn't do much for me tonight except to start me feeling that loss is part of life, no don't put your arm around me or I'll crack wide open --- gods, I could use a smoke --- "

"Shzbsh, Frawnces. Now."

A seven foot tall china hutch stood beside the Genderblender. A collection of antimacassars, figurines of little china animals and the fragments of a lifetime of family memories decorated the shelves. Frances slumped to bury her face in Moley's shoulder as he patted her quaking back. "You're nice to me and I don't deserve you. What did you see in me when Mrsdm first surfaced? Why are we friends? Why, why?"

"Cnit."

Frances let it all go as would Oyá in battle mode, crying loudly before swallowing back further sobs. "Why? I want to know why you want me to live with you without bedding benefits, why I shouldn't join the homeless in the warm sewers tonight and hang out by trash fires in Manhattan or Weehawken or Hoboken, oh it doesn't really matter where I live --- I'm a burden to Felicity because her house is packed full in ordinary times and tonight she has this enormous Martin Luther King Day party going on but I couldn't stand the noise another minute --- "

"Cnit."
"Okay." Frances continued with an occasional hiccup. "Mom's hutch will get ruined by the rain or snow, when it finally snows this winter, and I need shelter somewhere. I don't want to burden you, either --- was that a kiss?" She rubbed her cheek.

"Frawnces pretty like rose quartz." Moley sniffed the notch of Frances' throat and she froze as still as the inanimate copper and wooden crafted pieces. "Frawnces smell like spring flowers. No flowers in deeps, only mushrooms. You grn, Frawnces, that is why." He went back to hugging her and she went limp as he nuzzled the turquoise hair behind her ear. "My drzhp, whash you want next?"

So he liked her for her looks and her scent? Animals shopped for mates like that; Frances felt her self-esteem adjust downwards three levels from Santeria strata. She'd only imagined she was equanimical with her reduced circumstances because tonight showed her that she had been living high on the bush hog in a rundown boarding house. Being homeless proved more sobering than it would seem, because she had optimistically thought it might feel freeing on January 14 when Jeff knocked on her door with final eviction notices. Jeff had shut up for once except for a single question. "Wait, where do yez want your mom's furniture?"

She gave him the address numbly in as mechanical a voice as one of her kiddie rides used to have, he wrote it down laboriously for the guy driving the pickup and she would never remember the ride from Hoboken to Manhattan. Funkytown offered no overt shelter aboveground; the airlock below the Moon Rocket would have to cover her in bad weather.

She made herself brighten as she faced reality in the here and now, on her own and bypassing Santeria. In hot weather, the airlock and descending tunnel would work well as a residence, because underground temps stayed steady at 52 degrees, a little chilly but she could make do. She'd packed sweaters, leggings, gloves and cold weather clothing on the notion that one could always add clothing in layers. There were decent limits to taking clothes off, though.

"What do I want next? Give me some mushrooms to nibble on, Moley. I'm depending on you for food until I get food benefits started, I'll need to put up a post box on the lot for my mail, change my address with the post office, tell Godmother Felicity not to expect me tomorrow night, and other things as they arise. I'll lick this problem." She squared her shoulders. "I'm not a Yale grad for nothing."

"Thrь one day at time, Frawnces."

He looked up at her, his heart as plain and simple as a king's gets. She poked him in the arm fraternally. "I am here for you and you are here for me. We're Team Rocket, never mind the reference."

"Frmkl Rocket, I like."
"Me, too." Frances wiped her face with her sleeve hard enough to jangle her bracelets. "I'm hungry, Moley."

"Morels on menu."

"Mmmmmm. That's a start."

IOIOIOIOIO

"Gee, Skippa, wot do you want to do tonight?"

"Same as we do every night, Private. Try to take over the world."

"We'll thwart you two. We do every time."

"AhgrommtzRio. Karnivahl!"

Risk: Penguin Commando Version lay before the team, ready for conquest. Planet Earth blossomed ripe for the taking in front of the two teams in one. Skipper settled into his habitual spot at head of their all purpose table. "Armies in place for deployment?"

"Check, Skippa." Private picked up the die, twiddling it masterfully before his roll of highest count. "I claim Antarctica!"

"Bold move, Private. Rico and I salute you." Rico's face was less generous than his partner's words. He pouted.

"Ahgrommtzhome. Bad 'Rivate."

"I am not!"

"Rico, fair is fair. The Antarctica gambit means Private gets two extra reinforcements per turn and it can only be accessed by one territory, Australia." Kowalski seemed happy to dump this info on his teammates without thinking of consequences to his own player success.

Rico phased from disgruntled into smug. "Palsies, Kwoskii?"

"You know it, bird." Rico high oned his love and stuck his tongue out at Private.
"Hehburn."

Skipper groaned. "This isn't the cheaters version of the game, men. Play within the rules."

"Now, Skipper, forming allies is unofficially official." Kowalski beamed at his love before turning to his commander. "I'm assuming that you and Private --- "

"Wot'll our signals be tonight, Skippa? Let's do a change up from when we played before. I vote for secrecy-secret codewords!" A series of winks made Skipper uncomfortable.

"Not this time --- "

"Whyever not? We nearly had K'walski and Rico dead to rights for the win before I accidentally upset the board last weekend." There existed a tone that Skipper had not heard before in his love: entitlement. His discomfort shaded into something more intense.

"I just think partnership's not a thing you and I need as a strategy every time, that's all. Let's each go it alone for tonight and let Kowalski and Rico team up, if they want to."

Petulance flavored the young penguin's response. "Well, if you want. I guess I'll have to, now."

Minutes of silence descended as artillery, infantry, and cavalry units assumed their places by each penguin's side as the game began. Kowalski broke the conversational ice blithely. "Private, alliances aren't limited to two players, so you could join Rico and me --- "

"Yah!"

Skipper swore later that he made not one move or look or growl to either encourage or dissuade this option, but Private forged ahead after a pointed look in his direction. "Righto, gents, three against one it is. Let's see now, South America --- ooh, look, that's Chile! --- is closest to Antarctica and, er --- " His brow dipped and rose. "K'walski, why isn't South America the one territory that Antarctica gets attacks from? It's the closest continent to our home, not Australia."

Kowalski assumed the position of know-it-all. The only two heads who didn't swivel in his direction for information were Skipper's from his accustomed seat and Faux Skipper's plasticky one from over by the porthole. "Australia has less population and ports to attack from, I believe. If I were to design a game, I'd want to be fairest to the smallest, least populated continent. Why, even Atlantis contains more folks than Antarctica."

Skipper made a face at the ongoing blather after he rolled his die. "I claim Atlantis. Underwater combat is my forte, I commanded underwater attack teams when I was stationed there, so look out, all three of you. I'm not outnumbered."
Kowalski swallowed his tongue for a minute. "Kaffkaffgwah, Skipper, we're not ganging up on you, and all of us know that you've the greater experience in battle --- "

This was getting out of hand, for a game night. "Right as thunderclouds, viejo, I do." Skipper's gaze swept the table. "Right as thunderclouds. Let's play."

Rico's sunny nature won the day. "FEEEEESHon!"

Kowalski's laugh sounded forced. "Tee hee, Rico, just like Jeremy Wade would have said it, you make the best partner on and off the gaming table, my own big fella --- "

Rico looked queasy and he belched. Kowalski waved a flipper in front of himself. "Phew! That's ripe, Rico, um sorry to bring up mushy love stuff to unsettle you, here now think platonic thoughts straightaway --- "

Rico blanked his eyes to fix his problem. Five seconds later, he was cured.

"We playin' or not?" Private passed the die to Kowalski.

Rico placed his flipper over Kowalski's as Kowalski took his turn and Kowalski did likewise for Rico's turn. They whispered and then used their combined strength of sixty armies all on Asia's twelve territories.

"Wow," said Private. "That's goin' against known strategies. I'm amazed you have the guts."

"Join us, Private?" Kowalski offered a placating wink at Skipper before beckoning Private further. "We can dominate if you join us with the rest of your armies. That's what partnership is about, right, Skipper, a team against the outside world?"

Skipper rubbed the back of his neck. "Something like that, soldier. Asia has the most ports to drive an attack from and is the largest continent with twelve territories. It's generally poor strategy to risk -- - yes I know what I said, Private, quit giggling --- placing all your forces there to diminish the risk --- for Tito's sake there you go again --- of spreading your forces too thin. Hmm." "And if I join you two, wot does that do? Make you big fat bullies?" Private did not sound as outraged at this possibility as he would have one year ago.

"It's not just us, Private, it's you, too, and bully is such a harsh word --- "

"Yah." Rico slid down in his seat. "Yahítis."
Skipper looked out the porthole at black water as Faux Skipper looked out, too. "Make up your mind, or we can quit to return to this another day, Private." He made his decision. "I'm banking my play on Atlantis, and nothing but Atlantis."

Private chose. "Skippa, your purist nature shows time and time again, however do you keep it up? I'll go with Rico and K'walski. There, it's done! The rest of my men on Asia."

Kowalski, Rico and Skipper sighed as one. "There are 44 territories and they all must be occupied, Private. Split up your forces," Kowalski reminded. "Joining us doesn't mean put all your eggs in one basket."

"Eggs, mmmm, righto. I wouldn't put my egg anywhere except on top of my feet, safe and warm to cuddle --- "

"For Sanger's sake, Private, stay on topic!"

"It's a saying, Private. Come on, decide."

Rico was succinct. "Divvynao."

"Done, gents." Private smirked. "We'll take you on head to bleedin' head, Skippa."

Skipper tamped down his blood pressure. "There's one unoccupied territory left, Private, and it's Argentina --- wait, wait! Argentina is next to Chile! I transfer one infantry unit from Atlantis to Argentina to cover the rules. Maybe when it gets leave it'll have funsies with the Chinstrap Sisters in Punta Arenas."

Private drummed his flippertips on the table. "Do you even remember their names? You always call them the Chinstrap Sisters. I'm just askin'."

"Estrellita," answered Skipper. "Juana. Araceli. Fanny. Fanny was the one who stayed behind when we swam to Bouvet Island."

Private won the game night through a combination of good luck and possible cosseting by Rico and Kowalski. Skipper did not request another game night for two weeks.

IOIOIOIOIO
"Wh-What's she doing, Kowalski?"

“She? I observe nothing to indicate — ”

“Well, it’s from me, so it isn’t an it, it’s a she. No hes involved, unless you added a little something of yourself to the mix — ”

“Of course not! That would have contaminated the entire experiment! Purest scientific blasphemy! Watch what you say, Marlene!”

Marlene stood her ground. “Hes and shes together aren’t contamination, Kowalski. Watch what you say.”

Kowalski uttered a hmphhh and then peered through the crystal containment unit housing the Petri dish. The lively specimen within batted against the sides of the unit and then bent in a strange way. The scientist would have said that it mooned him if the general shape weren’t that of a hand. “Er, the female principle culture is under thorough study, but I don’t have a hypothesis yet. In the seven weeks since the culture germinated, it’s grown into grayish blobs merging into blue green bumps and now a solitary putrid smelling baobab. Ew, the fingers waggling evoke a certain nausea, do they not?”

“Putrid I understand,” commented Marlene, “but what is a baobab?”

Kowalski put on his teaching tone. “It’s sometimes called the upside down tree because the branches look like they are its roots sticking into the air, which is especially apt since the tree is common in the upside-downiest, craziest place on our planet, Madagascar. Did we ever tell you about our adventures there?”

Marlene played patty cake through the crystal barrier with the fingerlike extrusions rising from the pink agar. They were one half the size of her own digits. She shook her head, still entranced by the concoction that had come from her body. “Aw, no, I don’t think so — ”

“You’d remember if we had, believe me.”

“Then the answer is no. Hey, ‘Ski, tell me some other time, okay? This little gal is cute!”

The nascent growth mirrored Marlene’s movements in a robotic fashion. Kowalski set the containment unit’s illumination filter to full and the crystal blackened to hide its inhabitant. “It’s time for it to rest.” He noted some data on his clipboard before placing it on the lab shelf. “Don’t get emotionally attached to an experiment, ‘Eenie. Word to the wise from someone who’s been there and done that.”

She scoffed at his serious look. “What harm could it do? I think you worry too much.”

“I’ve learned to control my passions for Science.”

Marlene appeared skeptical. “Are you crossing your digits behind your back, um, forget I said that. Pooh, Kowalski, I’m having trouble believing that about you. You’re a passionate guy, for a scientist type. Take Doris, for example — ”
“She is history in my experiment archive, gathering dust.”

“That’s a little harsh, I mean she once meant a lot to you.”

“That was true; it’s no longer true. I loved and lost, and loved again. I’m happy now.”

She spilled the metaphorical grains of salt she had been prepared to swallow his words with because anything for a friend. “Then I, I am happy for you.” She skittered for the lab’s door. “Keep an eye on her like you promised because the female principle can’t really be caged.”

He was back to swelling with hubris. “My containment units are top of the line, to my specifications. Rico barfed them to perfection.”

She felt a doorknob moment coming on as she heard the pride in his voice. “Somebody ought to quote Sherlock Holmes at you, Science Guy: The motives of women are inscrutable. Gotta go keep a play date with Skipper for me to trounce his tailfeathers at snowballing, seeya around the habitats.”

Kowalski waited until the lab door closed behind her before declaiming, “I refuse to predicate any experiment of mine on nonsense spewed by a fictional detective. I shall and will discover the female principle and use it to our male advantage, so help me Kinsey.”

IOIOIOIOIO

“Coming at you!”

Shading his eyes with one flipper against noontime sun, Skipper batted away the snowball like Ichiro with his other one. “Is that the best you can do, Marlene?”

“Not even close!” Marlene lobbed a softball pitch, Skipper dodged and the snowball splatted against a thick bicep. He kissed one brawny expanse and then the other as if Hulk Hogan were judging his toned physique on Muscle Beach.

Marlene kicked up the scanty snow at her feet in a fit of pique. “Not fair! I don’t have a chance — ”

“Baw boo hoo, afraid of competition?”

Now there flew a flurry of packed snowballs as fast as she could throw them. “Jerk!”

“Hey now, I am not!” Shoulders set, he forged through the barrage like an icebreaker approaching the Weddell Sea in mid-July. “You’re pissed at the wrong guy. I wasn’t the one bringing up past romances. I’m not anything like Guillermo.” Flippers akimbo, he pierced her with a hurt expression until she felt chastened.

“Maybe a little around the edges inside, you are.” She looked at him cross-eyed. “But you don’t resemble him” — she sniffed — “or smell like him.” She glanced down. “That’s a good thing, just so you know.”

He stood shoulder to shoulder with her as he faced the opposite direction. She stayed stiff when he tried to sway her sideways. He desisted.

“Chill like a penguin, Marlene. Guillermo may have been an otter, but his memory has you buffaloed.”

She managed half a titter. “Heh.”

“Any news from Penny?”
Marlene waved a paw. “She’s fine, back to normal, I guess. She told me that if Alice’s mystery is that she’s training for the Half Marathon on March 18, her lunch diet needs a change from chips, broccoli tidbits, vitamin pills, and diet cola. It’s not very interesting intel.”

“Alice must be pigging out at breakfast and dinner, then, because she’s slopping around chunkier than before. Maurice The Zookeeper helps her out more than ever. I’m placing Alice Issues on the tip toppiest back burner for the nonce.”

“Okay. Maybe my imagination ran away with me. You’re right to take Alice off your tip toppiest front burner.”

Skipper cast about for cheer. “I had a good thing happen today. Want to hear about it?” Always give options when practical, he thought, and when time permits.

“Yeah, sure.” She continued staring down at the scanty snow cover.

“You’re looking at it. There hasn’t been much snow this winter and it’s good having a break from routine like that.”

Marlene grunted. “Yeah, sometimes. Other times you gather routine around your shoulders like a cloak in one of Private’s plays he likes so much. It can be comforting.” She kicked a crosshatch pattern in the snow and he hooked his leg through hers in a wrestling move designed to topple an opponent. He pulled until her supple otter spine bent sideways. “No, don’t. I don’t feel like it.”

Okay, cut your losses, Skipper. “I’ll leave.”

Commotion from the lemur habitat drew their attention like a blast of rubidium would. “Damn, another jitterbug contest. I like big band music as much as the next penguin, but — ”

“Guillermo liked mariachi. You have that in common with him.”

Skipper thought it best not to chuckle. “Well, with a name like Guillermo, that’s natural, chica.”

“Hear from Kitka lately?”

“No. She moved her nest. I don’t expect ever to see her again.”

The boombox switched from a lively Opus One to a slower paced I’m Getting Sentimental Over You. “You sound okay with that.”

“Private might not handle the meetup well, so I’m more than okay with the idea of leaving her flying into the mists of time past.”

“Poetry from you? Man oh man, you’ve changed in three months, Skipper.”

“Don’t tell anyone. It was a slip of the beak.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s a good thing, then.” The music blared The Beer Barrel Polka. “I want some more fun before you go. Help me make it through the night, Skipper.”

“What? It’s lunchtime.”

“Play with me, come on, it’s not Fun Day but I need you.”

“As a friend, you mean, well all right. I’m yours to command — ”
Marlene rolled her shoulder over his until she pressed her belly to his back. “Did anyone ever tell you you’re really ticklish?” She tickled both pits until he bent over, out of control.

“Oh yeah, bird, I got you where I want you — ”

He couldn’t talk but he could reach around to grab her thighs. He hoisted her into a horsey ride around her slushy habitat meadow. She rode him hard until coming upon her plane tree and then she swung all her weight to the right to make them fall.

“Oh, right in the slop, you goon, why’d you do that — ”

His solid weight captured her right paw and she didn’t want him to leave just yet. “Wrestle?”

“I’ve already got you pinned, what’s the point?” She kicked his tail.

“Now that’s no fair. My tail is as sensitive and full of nerve endings as yours. That hurt. Ow. Owwie. Ouchie, waaaaaaa I’m telling mom — ”

Before she knew it, he straddled her belly to slam both paws into the combination of snow and mud. She wriggled knowingly under his imprisoning body until he gasped. “Oooh, something else is sensitive, don’t tempt me — ”

“We boys have a defense against illegal tactics.” He swept his legs together to her left side while keeping her paws confined. He leaned hard over her ribs, his beak close to her muzzle. “Give?”

It was long enough a bout to get her adrenaline pumping, so she gave. “I give.”

He sat up, rubbing his tail. “You’re too easy.”

“Guillermo didn’t think so. It was one of the last things he shouted at me when we broke up.”

“Tee Em Eye, Marlene.” Julien kept up his forties music kick with the Andrews Sisters’ *Bounce Me, Brother, With A Solid Four.*

“Guillermo used to bounce me with his solid four — ”

“Did he now? Tell me more, mamacita.” He took up the challenge when she thought he’d back off and she stuttered.

“F-Forget I said anything, not thinking clearly, in a weird mood, I guess — ”

He dripped a blob of snow on her chest. “We cool? You going to make it through the night?”

“I get by with a little help from my friends, you and Prince Buzzy.” She smiled sweetly. “He knows the ins and outs of me even better than you do.”

“Who’s Prince — oh! Tee Em Eye up to eleven, Marlene. I’m leaving. Sleep tight tonight.”

“Who says I’ll wait until tonight?”

Skipper vaulted quickly away. “Ack! *Adios!”

“Goodbye, m’friend.”

IOIOIOIOIO
“Team, as of last week, I am one hundred percent legal in Denmark.” Skipper leaned back into Private’s preening of his coat after he’d washed away mud. “And damn, it doesn’t get better than that.”

Private continued mashing the finely shaped feathers between his beak to spread the waterproofing oil. Kowalski flung his flipper around Rico’s waist. “I can imagine. Denmark might serve now to vacation in, right?”

“Maybe. Yes, Rico, I realize you want to visit a fjord again like we did in Åland” — Rico shrugged noncommittally and Skipper took note — “you mean it’s off your bucket list?”

Rico’s grin was sheepish. “Hpayhere.” The couple swayed together, hip to hip, lost in each other.

“Huh. How about that. Things change, I guess, right, Private?”

“Mmmglpshhhhmmm.” Private worked onward. “I’m happy enough here, too. bbblllmph.”

“You mean you’re done with travel? That’s surprising to me. Aww, you cutiepie, you’re just full of surprises. Come here.” Private squawked at the horseplay as Skipper upended him to burble against his tummy. Unleaderlike murmurings rose from the snowy depths of Private’s belly feathers as Skipper indulged in lover babble with a greater ease than he had with Kitka.

“Stop! Please.”

“Eh? Okay, it’s time for calisthenics, anyway. Topside, men.” Skipper turned playful. “First one up into the snow gets to make snow angels now that we finally got a smattering of snow.”

Rico leaped up as if on springs with Kowalski right behind as Skipper set one foot onto the ladder. “Whether we wear FitBits or not, I’ll outdo you in whatever exercise you want, Private — what’s the trouble, babe?”

Private hung behind, flippers tapping in agitation. He saw what he was doing and stopped. “Skippa, did you like wot we did a week ago on St. Valentine’s Day?” His voice sounded solemn.

“Wh-Why, yes, Private. You were in top form, we enjoyed each other to the max after raiding the Danish Embassy, what more could any penguin want in one day, why do you ask?”

“I thought you got bored after your perfect mission success.” Private sat on the bottom bunk. “You looked like you were countin’ the pigeons in the flock that flew over our island right before I came like a freight train, or so you called it.”

Swift as thought, Skipper shuttled to the bunk to sit beside his love. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. I tried hard.”

“You sure did! I came eventually, remember?” Skipper leaned into Private’s shoulder and instead of nuzzling back, Private stayed slumped.

Skipper sighed. “As commander, I need to think of our next mission. Frankie clued me in that Frances Alberta is up to something, and just because we’ve not seen her since Hallett doesn’t mean she’s not planning an ethnic cleansing of us zoo animals.” He resolved to comfort as best he could, lover or commander or both. “I was admiring your delts flexing as you slammed inside me and looked up and the flock reminded me of work, well, um, I apologize for being distracted. It’s all on me.” There. He was proud of how he handled that.
“And you believe Frankie, that braapin’ troublemaker?”

“Don’t swear, Private. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Wot does?”

Another tack might drag out the reason for this discontent. “You suit me from babyhood to now. As for what suits you, well, you’re adult and make your own choices. I must suit you, correctamundo? You came on to me.”

“It’s been bloody marvelous, but you know, Skippa, I keep wonderin’ when I’ll join the list of Kitka, Juana, Araceli, Viola, and maybe K—”

Skipper rushed to dam the flood of words. “Seawater under the bridge of sighs, Private. I was your first but you were not mine. No bird can change his feathers back into downy fluff.” He hugged Private’s dejected delts. “Come on now, buck up. You and me are a we, you haven’t lost me or vice versa. I love you.” He frowned. “I’ve told you many times that there was no Viola.”

“Mmm, perhaps not, but was there a K—” A gleeful booming baritone drowned out Private’s mumbled question.

“Skipper, you have got to see this! Rico and I made art in the snow!” Kowalski’s shout echoed into the lair along with Rico’s wild gabbling.

“In a minute, men!” Just like that, the sober mood broke into darker territory as Private acknowledged his deepest fear in a way that Dr. Phil would have approved.

“You’ll get tired of me. I’m dull and not like you and h-haven’t big fat world spannin’ adventures like Manfredi’s and Johnson’s to share on a wintry holiday night like tonight — ”

Skipper came close to losing it. “Shut up about them. Life is for the living, you and I are living. It’s you and me and damn, do I have to say it again?” A solution presented itself. “Look, I propose a hiatus to sex because that is what seems to have triggered this. Sex isn’t everything, guv’na. We’ll have good times without it.” He spoke to reassure himself as well as his love. “You’ll see.”

“Y-You mean a hiatus like when the Lunacorns got gobsmacked by a writin’ strike last year?”

“Yes, babe. Like that.” Skipper took a chance and ruffled Private’s head feathers and the young penguin didn’t lean away.

“I missed them.”

“They returned with new episodes, or so you tell me. I’ve, er, been otherwise occupied when they come on.”

Private thought some more. “Um, honey, n-not even wankin’ —”

“Of course not. No wanking is implied.”

Private’s level of enthusiasm slipped a notch. “I’m up for calisthenics, Skippa. Thanks for listenin’.” He pecked Skipper’s cheek. “I’m glad you’re my main squeeze.”

Skipper’s breath hitched. “Me, too.”

“I’ll visit Marlene after exercisin’, I think. Come along?”
“Not now. She’ll like the company, I’m sure. Tell her hi.” Marlene’s disposition earlier gave Skipper pause. “You might ask her relationshippy questions. Remember how she helped with Operation: Beaver Love Hexagon?”

“She did? I was there and I don’t remember anythin’ sexy about — ”

“You’ve got sex on the bean, boyo! It’s a hexagon, not sexagon, and it means a six-sided geometrical figure. Think Becky, James, Stacey, Logan, Carlos, and Kendall.”

“Righto.” Private rallied his emotions up to resigned from despondent, hoping the exercises would prove inspiring.

“Skipper’s Log Home Version 4.9: I never thought this would happen to me.” Skipper’s voice got small, but luckily the auto pick up feature on the tape recorder supplemented the volume. “I never thought I would live to the age for it to be common. It shouldn’t be common for me now.” He pursued his self-pleasure doggedly and made progress after ten minutes. He concentrated only on the mission and tried to forget about time. Nothing had ever mattered quite as much in this particular way and he wanted to be able to say that he had given it all his effort.

The tape recorder continued recording because Skipper forgot to turn it off and later on in the month when he searched for the spot on the tape to begin another entry, he was forced to hear what took place all over again. He ditched the tape quick as a ferret could become hyper and stuck in a new one at that point.

Rico and Kowalski burst into the lair talking loud about this Presidents Day holiday and laughing boisterously at something. Skipper turned over to face the inside of the bunk he shared with Private on an as needed basis and jacked only fast enough to idle his engines as he kept up his momentum. With all his discipline, he blanked out their happy voices to retain focus on the matter at hand. He visualized hard completing the act he’d begun on Black Friday with his love, but thinking hard didn’t turn him hard enough.

“Skipper, why are you in bed at this time of day? Are you sick?” Kowalski’s nurturing instinct homed in on anything out of the ordinary that happened to involve physical wellbeing within the team. As he approached the bunk, he became worried. His commander made an inarticulate sound like hlpme when his lieutenant’s flipper touched him gently to find out the trouble. When he was rolled over so that Kowalski could see better, the problem was obvious.

Rico recoiled. “Srytrintrupt, ‘Kipppppaaah! Kwoskii, lesgo!” He was halfway up the ladder when Kowalski called him back.

Drawing upon all Dr. Phil’s wisdom, Kowalski managed, “You can’t change what you don’t acknowledge.”

“Mnmhm.” It seemed inarticulate was Skipper’s style this afternoon and Kowalski dealt with it. He hadn’t wanted to eavesdrop in their quarters despite bunks which acted as echo chambers to nighttime activities with the right barometric pressure. It was a good thing that they were all so close in spirit that embarrassment happened infrequently.

“You and Private are having problems in bed?”
“Yuh.”

“So you think you can’t do him?”

“Er.” At the affirmative reply, Rico squawked in denial. He flapped his flippers wildly for good measure until Kowalski elbowed him into subsiding.

Kowalski’s next question came from his own wisdom and not Dr. Phil’s.

“Is it because Private is so virginal that you don’t want to spoil that in him? So today you want to, um, practice? And you can’t?”

Silence.

Bingo, thought Kowalski. He gestured to Rico and knelt by the bunk. After a further jerk of the head, Rico joined him shoulder to shoulder as he knelt, too. They both lay flippers on their leader and in a moment, Skipper relaxed enough to allow the help to continue. “Ahhh,” he said when Rico’s effleurage caressed his chest over the bump of his worst scar and “Oh” when Kowalski drew upon his cock to firm it. That took longer than Kowalski calculated and when his efforts were crowned with success at last, he nearly tebowed in a non-ironic way.

“Mhhhh,” said Skipper when Rico got inspired to knee-walk around Kowalski’s back to hoist one of his commander’s legs. When Rico’s flippertip penetrated his opening, Skipper closed his eyes and moaned. As the movement inside him deepened to add a seductive flutter, he moaned louder and longer. When the crisis was hottest, Kowalski put pressure on the belly with one flipper and added a twist to each up and down slide when the other flipper reached the tip of the bashful cock.

Skipper came undone. “Ahzglaggle,” he groaned at the short digs and came like a fourth grade science fair experiment involving vinegar and baking soda. Kowalski and Rico noted that he was a bubbler as opposed to a squirter.

“I broke my promise to Private,” Skipper said when he could talk.

Kowalski withdrew his flippers from Rico’s raspy tongue and gave a final lick himself to finish the job. Rico sagged up against the bunk as if he himself had come and his lover sat side by side with him.

Skipper addressed the backs of their heads, which made things easier somehow. “I promised him to stop dating Doris and Kitka and everybody else. We exchanged pebbles before having sex, for Cousteau’s sake!” He pounded the roof of his bunk space three times accompanied by his trademark wordless yell. “Now I feel like a jerk!”

“Pssshffft!” pooh-poohed Rico. He pointed to Faux Skipper languishing by the porthole. “Stopwifhim tu?”

“Heehoohahaha! Sorry, sir, I realize this is serious for you.”

Rico chuckled and pointed to Miss Perky sitting on Private’s trophy fish. “Eh?” This time Skipper giggled a little and when Rico indicated the trophy fish, too, he collapsed along with Kowalski. The release of laughter made the friends hysterical as they wound up with sore diaphragms.

“Ow. Little twinge there left over from Kastelholm.”

“Let me do a thing or three about that — ”
“Not yet. I deserve some pain.”

“Oh you do not. Neither Rico nor I are female so technically you did not break your promise.”

Kowalski drew a deep breath. “We will want to air out the HQ, sir. Your musk is as distinctively intoxicating as always. Private might return from visiting Marlene and think we’ve all three been doing something behind his back —”

“I’d like to do something behind his back, or on top of it.” They grew quiet. Skipper sighed after a span of time longer than it would take for Alice to make toast but shorter than hard boiling an egg. “Thanks, men. This helped.”

“You’ll work things out, Skipper.”

“Yah.” Rico ascended the ladder to shove aside the food dish forming its cover to allow fresher air to circulate. He poked his head down from the top to warn them. “’Rivate nao.”

They heard the young penguin’s voice. “’Allo, Rico. Wot are you up to, then?”

“Nuffn. HowzEenie?”

“For not bein’ a penguin, she gave some smashin’ keen advice on … things.”

“Yahgud.”

“Why are you stickin’ your leg down the hatch and wigglin’ it?”

“Chryhoss.”

“Walkin’ on it will make it hurt less. Hang on, I’ll walk with you.” The sound of their footsteps faded.

Skipper made a sound that Kowalski couldn’t classify. “My Private. That’s why I love him.”

“I see.”

“Yeah, and I want to do right by him. If I can’t lick this problem —”

“He’ll understand.”

There was only one reply to that. “He deserves better.”

“Allow some time, sir. It’s only been three months since you gave him your pebble.” Kowalski got inspired. “’Lick this problem?’ Starting with oral and moving out from there sounds like a short-term option. It’ll involve him more than a flipper job, not that I am listening in on you at night, oh no.”

Skipper was wise enough himself not to mention what nobody talked about as morning followed morning in their new relationship-laden HQ. “You think so?”

“Yes, and if you allow him to taste your pits, too, your androstandienone will speed up both of your blood pressures, heart rates and levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. You let him go first, and then you lick his. All good things follow after that. I’m sure they will.”

“Kowalski! Stress is the last thing I need now! There’s this and Phil breaking up with Mason again and the Alice mystery and the Frances Alberta mystery and the Mole Men mystery and then when you factor in the Mole Women —”
Kowalski heard Rico and Private returning and hurried his speech. “Stress relief is sex scientifically try this won’t you?”

“I’ll try anything short of giving him up except if it were for his own good. I’m desperate, viejo.”

When Rico and Private hopped down the ladder, they found Skipper drinking a cup of sardine coffee and Kowalski flat on his back in his and Rico’s SuperKing Size bunk. The scientist waggled a flipper at his lover. “C’mere, you. I want a nooner.”

“Ah, Skippa and I’ll just go for a swim, shall we? Honey, let’s light out for parts known, all right?”

Skipper put down his cup. “Seguro, babe.”

Private took over a full week to work up his courage to tell Skipper what Marlene had advised.
Marlene dove into her pool nine seconds before Private vaulted her habitat barrier. When she surfaced after three minutes, his sober little face greeted her without its usual cheer. She, on the other hand, felt pretty darn good after her penguin Protector of the Zoo's visit and a trio of juicy oysters for lunch. "Private! Hi!"

"Hi, Marlene. Do you mind if I knock you up?"

"Hee, you're cute. Yes, I would mind, even if it were possible."

"Oh, um, righto, of course you would, sorry I wasn't thinkin' about you bein' American and takin' it the wrong way, got other things on my mind, I suppose. Have time for a chitchat, then?"

Marlene hauled out and sat beside her pool, splashing him with a grin as she kicked her feet. His answering grin was one hundred seventy-fourth the wattage of Miss Perky's. "What's up?"

He sat beside her and splashed her in return. "Skippa and I need your help."

"Sure! Uh, not judging another burping contest, right, because that last one grossed me out so bad --  

"Skippa said you might have an idea on how he and I can be happy again." Private looked down at his lap as he stopped splashing.

The last droplets trickled from Marlene's thighs back into the pool. She took a deep breath and hugged Private's shoulders. "Awww, I'm sorry you two are having problems! Whatever I can help with, I will, and that's a promise."

The young penguin's breath hitched as he leaned his head against hers and he took a moment to form the troubles into what he wanted to share with her without giving too much of his private life away. Outside of being Mr. Tux long ago, having a private life was different from his baseline, and he seized on Buck Rotgut's Routine Two: Peace Out to explain the sitch. "We commandos have a routine called Peace Out that says wot we need to do if we don't fancy somebody we live or work with."

Marlene tightened her grip in a spasm of shock and kissed the top of Private's head. "Whoa whoa whoa! You and Skipper don't like each other anymore after only three months? Whew, talk about fast!" Skipper's demeanor had hinted at none of these goings on, the stinker. Honestly, he was worse than a pismo clam at clamming up.

"I never said that!"

Marlene didn't hear him as she babbled in distress. "Look I know Skipper can be thickheaded and tough as nails but he's in love with you Private so give him another chance aw don't break up aw no aw geeeee --- "

"Marlene! Snap out of it!"

"Okay, watch the merchandise with the poking. I don't like bad touching, Private." She scooted away and crossed her paws over her chest after smoothing her white ruff back into order. "Start over from the beginning."
Private couldn't seem to sit still. He swayed as he swallowed a sob. "Um, this is hard to talk about."

Marlene softened. "I can imagine." She struggled to come up with a scenario. "Is Skipper back to his wandering ways, like he's headed out on a solo mission soon and when he goes you'll worry about him staying true because of all the other times he had no one to be true to and now he does? Need to be true, I mean."

"No. It's worse."

"Trust me, there's nothing worse than smelling somebody else on your man's fur when he's sworn --- never mind. Go on."

A solitary tear coursed down his cheek. "We're hiatusin' on sex because Skippa says I can't do him anymore because he says um implies he wants to do me now because we traded off um positions after our first time when he couldn't do me well all the way to the end I mean" --- he stopped to breathe --- "and it's bloody awful because he never never had problems with any females but now he's got problems d-d-d-doin' me and I'm afraid he won't be able to do it with me ever and he'll get tired of always havin' me inside him instead of us takin' turns and he'll he'll he'll break up w-w-w- with me-e-e-e---"

Marlene was unprepared to comfort a wailing penguin who pushed his head into her lap and cried his heart out. This was serious in a way that she could never have imagined. Skipper as a bottom? That didn't parse in any scenario. Whooeee, he must really love Private if he allowed himself to --- aw. She patted Private's head and smoothed his flippers that covered his face. After a long time, he quietened. She thought he succumbed to exhausted sleep. "Rest easy, Private. I'll help you and Skipper," she whispered.

He twitched awake. "You're a jolly good friend to us, Marlene." He didn't move and maybe it was easier this way so she could gather intel without direct confrontation, for lack of a better word.

"So, Private, I don't know if Skipper told you or not, but I saw you guys by accident that first night and it looked like he had the upper flipper. What happened?"

"Oh. He only said that you knew about him and me directly after we exchanged pebbles. Right then. Well." He sniffed away some congestion. "He loves me and can't stand to hurt me, he says, so he let me do him all this time and well, naturally, he must be wantin' a change, I mean, who wouldn't after three months of a bit of the other every day and sometimes twice?" He clenched her knee. "I wouldn't, that's who, because I said he could always top and I meant it because as long as he was mine he could pound me into the bleedin' cement if he wanted like I've been doin' him ---"

"I'm uncomfortable, Private."

He coughed and sniffled into his flippers. "Sorry! I'll sit up ---"

"Not that way."

"Oh. Tee Em Eye?"

"You could say that." She closed her eyes but the image remained seared behind her eyelids. "Wow. All this going on at our zoo. It makes me want to return to the Aquarium."

"When life was uncomplicated, eh?" Private needed something absorbent before he pulled a Rhonda and got snot all over her.

"Hold that thought. I'll be back in a jiffy." Marlene braced Private's shoulders and he rose to a
sitting position at the gentle nudges. She strode briskly into her cave to get a towel. After drying off her thighs, she returned to find Private looking resolute. She passed over the towel and he scrubbed his face in quick motions before blowing his beak and tossing the towel away.

"I'm in to fight for him just like if our sitches were topsy turvy because he'd, he'd do it for me. If he needs my help gettin' it up --- "

"Stop! Right now!"

"Wot? It's the truth."

"Lots of things are, Private, but we keep them on the down low especially between friends. Now onto the practical parts of getting you two --- "

"Switch hittin'?"

"Yeah, if you want to put it that way. Private, adding different things into sex reaps great rewards, you must have heard of fun things like dressup --- "

"He wouldn't stand for it. He's said so."

"--- dirty talk --- "

"He hates to hear me braapin' swear."

" --- aaaaaand toys."

Private perked up. "He never has said a blinkin' word about toys."

"Ahah! Progress! I just may have a little gizmo to keep a buzz going on for him." She had to giggle away some tension over this sort of conversation. "Literally --- hee hee. Um, Private, wait out here a moment."

Marlene reentered her cave and rummaged behind a sketch of penguins that she'd rendered on canvas. She was the only one who knew it was supposed to be penguins because it was done deliberately in the Mondrian style according to Burt, who had given her the idea. There it was. She retrieved the dildo behind it with care and kissed it goodbye before wrapping a blue ribbon around the knobbed end. She took it into daylight after glancing around to see that no visitors or other zoo residents looked her way. It had never before seen the sun, she supposed, because she had brought it into her cave while it was new in its box. This next part would make her face flame like the grill on the hot dog cart, but hey, anything for a friend.

"Private, this is a dildo. See what it looks like? Well, that's what you use it for after putting this stuff on it. I keep mine inside the barrel." She opened the control end and showed him the generously sized tube of gel snugged next to the batteries. "Gentle is the keyword here, very, very gentle. It's not a substitute for the real thing but it's, it's a" --- how to explain this --- "condiment, like hot sauce. Things taste better when you use a condiment, right?"

Her metaphor went in one earhole and out the other. "That's wot we saw you play with after your guitar solo! I've never gotten close to one, let me feel it up." Private's eagerness made him impolite and he grabbed it out of her grasp. She smiled at his readiness until the words sunk in.

"What?"

He went on fiddling with the dial. "This settin' is for slow because it has a turtle and this one with
"Yeah you got it in one but what? You saw me?"

"That's right, when everyone got mad at us for keepin' private security files on them. I destroyed all the files, Marlene, so don't worry. Everyone's secrets are burnt to ashes and I vacuumed the ashes away." He offered a sunny smile. "Feel better?" He returned to hefting the weight of the ivory cylinder.

"Not much," Marlene growled as he spun it like an eskrima stick and made her nervous. "Like you said, this is hard to talk about." She turned away from him and glowered at the lack of privacy in any zoo or aquarium. How much different her life would be if she were actually born in the wild and living there as an adult. Hmmph. Being feral full time would be great.

"Yea, forsooth, milady." He was shorter than Skipper so his embrace from behind made his beak slither into her pit and she giggled whether she willed it or not. "We're all friends here, as you said not all that long ago when I was moulting. I understand that you have needs, Marlene."

"Mmmhmm, yeah, that's nice. I think. Maybe? Oh stop that, you're tickling me. Stop!"

He looked like his mood returned to the hopeful side that she herself hoped he never lost for good and he giggled a little, too. "All righty roo then. Thanks for the toy. I'm up for wotever else you may advise."

She had to ask. "What does Peace Out have to do with you and Skipper?"

He put on a face that aged him beyond his years. "Peace is not the lack of healthy conflict, Marlene, and when we four spend so much time together, conflict happens. Buck Rockgut said, before he turned nutter, that is, that you walk a mile with someone in your unit you temporarily dislike and then you, you, see where your common ground is as you stroll about. Peace happens after we work for it because, Marlene, I don't want to think about it but I dislike Skippa now and then even though I love him. Does that make sense?"

"So much, Private, I can't believe it. You go for all you want in life, m'dear."

She could tell that Private preened himself figuratively. "Righto, wot else you got for me in the way of advice?"

Marlene thought of Guillermo. Nope, no inspiration there. Then the image flitted by of her solitary cross country trip in a shipping crate to The Big Apple from California. Hmm, there might be something ... "Take a road trip together? Not too far away for starters, maybe upstate?"

"Yeah, Skippa loves the outdoors."

"And Private? What does the private like?"

"Anythin' that Skippa likes."

Trouble ahead. "Yeah, see, that's not good in a relationship. You have your circle of outside friends and interests and so does Skipper, and when your circles overlap, it's beautiful." Desiderata, that was the name of the best poem she'd ever heard in a lifetime of generally avoiding poetry. "And when you realize that you are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars and you have a right to be here, you conclude that yours and Skipper's lives won't always overlap, and that's beautiful, too." Another snippet came up and she couldn't resist quoting it. "I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations, and you are not in this world to
live up to mine."

She frowned. That last came from another source, but hey, it sounded good to mesh with the first. She squinted at Private. "Get all that?"

"I'm tryin'!"

"Take it easy, bubbeleh. What didn't you get?"

Private flipped the dildo end for end. "Y-You mean that I should, should ... oh, Marlene, I'm gormless! I don't understand!" Before he bawled again, and by the quivering lower beak that appeared imminent, she had to, er, head him off at the pass.

"Whoa, cowboy, ease up on the reins! Breathe. Now again. One more. What I mean is that when two animals cater too much to each other, the third thing in the relationship, the, the relationship itself, gets shorted, you see, and that's hard to think about when you're just starting out with a serious lover."

Private balanced the dildo on one flipper idly, teetertottering it as his brow worked up and down in thought. Marlene got inspired. "See this dildo? Up and down, up and down, each penguin taking a turn on the, um, teetertotter." She was reaching to form a lesson as hard as she ever did for Becky, Stacy, Carlos, James, Logan and the other beaver whose name she'd forgotten, oh yeah right, Kendall. Heck, balancing six loves was tough, but she was only balancing two today. A little voice whispered go for it, Marlene. "Now if two sit on the same end, there's no playtime and if one sits too near the middle, the other one works harder to keep the play going than the first does."

Private continued the teetertotter, silent.

The voice insisted you can do this, Marlene. "So, Private, whatcha think?"

He surprised her. "I'm thinkin' that I need to do more thinkin'. I know wot makes me happy, and doin' wot he likes makes me happy." He turned soulful eyes to her and her heart melted. "How is that wrong?"

Ulps, said the little voice. "It's not! It's just that when you do more things for him than he does for you, it's unbalanced, don't you see? And the whole teetertotter falls apart." She knocked the dildo to the ground as she separated his flippers widely. "No more fun times, no more nothing. Then he says he doesn't like making all the decisions and you ought to be more assertive and then when you are, he doesn't like that either and then he breaks up with you, well it was actually mutual."

"Wot?"

That blast from the past burned her tail. "Never mind, long story that will never apply to you and Skipper if I can help it." She threw herself into her lesson. She grasped his flippers and chanted road trip road trip. "First, the road trip. You say he likes the outdoors and how about a switch for the two of you with something either've never done? How about going underground at Howe?"

"Say wot, now? How?"

"No, it's Howe. The caverns, you know?"

"Sorry, no." Private stood still as she jogged him back and forth to keep up the enthusiasm. He shifted weight and furrowed his brow as she did a Mexican Hat Dance with the dildo on the ground playing the part of the hat. Finally, he got impatient with her. "Stop, please! Be serious!"
That was the wrong thing to say. Marlene continued her metaphor as she continued her dance, happy that her reminiscences about Guillermo provided something useful after all. "It's all a dance, Private! You take small steps and he takes big ones this time and then you reverse roles and the whirling makes you dizzy." He'd dropped her paws so she placed them on her hips in traditional position, jigging and jogging the way Guillermo taught her. That part of their relationship had been a keeper, for he danced most excellently. "It's the opposite of serious, except when it isn't!"

"Oh you're being silly!"

"Guilty as charged, my friend. Come on, love is a dance, so let's do a silly dance." She switched to a sultry tango with him as he rolled his eyes but complied. "Howe Caverns is a ways upstate from here, Phil can look it up and I'm sure, by what I overheard Maurice The Zookeeper say, that it's about three hours by car. Then, my gosh, the way he described it was magical, like there were crystals hanging from the ceiling and sprouting from the ground."

Private unbent his attitude enough to bend in the correct fashion for dipping his partner. Marlene swayed backwards gracefully. "Oooh! Sounds lovely!"

She swooped upwards to shift their dance into a combination samba and mambo. "Yeah uh huh and he told Alice that his girlfriend got so into the whole underground cave-y primal thing that she, like, bowled him over on the tour and they, er, missed a turn in the cave system path and someone had to come rescue them. I think he was sorry that they were rescued." Marlene smirked as she bent Private backwards with a sultry face. "Know what I mean?"

"Do I! That's just wot I want for Skippa and me!" Private completed the samba-mambo-tango with a sensual slide as he ground their lower regions together. He tittered and stepped back. "Righto, then! I'll get on it and we'll plan this road trip! Thanks, Marlene!" He gave a courtly bow and kissed her paw in farewell.

She watched him bug out over her habitat wall. He'd taken the dildo with him, as she'd wanted. She whispered, "Hasta luego, Prince Buzzy. Now, Marlene, you'll need to resort to what you used before you got your Little Giant Model 5231." She wagged her paws the way she'd seen Wallace do at Gromit at one of the penguins' Cartoon Marathoons. "It's just Rosy Palm and her Four Sisters tonight."
Way back in zookeeper times, Frances Alberta sought gimmicks targeting specific demographics to entice to Hoboken Zoo. When Kwanzaa lent a week long reason for celebration, she commissioned artful banners and even drew a few herself. The gentle Lantern Festival eased the Chinese New Year's boisterous goings on as its last day and she could afford lanterns from Dollar Tree for Funkytown. In times past, she strung lucky red lanterns throughout the Hoboken Zoo's pristine grounds and on the lanterns, riddles in the shape of animals teased the minds of young and old. She kept the riddles simple, such as \( \text{lion} + \text{blue waves} = ? \) to mean a sea lion. The kiddies loved the holiday and today Funkytown catered to them.

Frances decided to pluck the good ideas from her past and ignore the ignoble ending of her administrative bureaucratic career. "Bye, higher! Up you go!"

Dexter's small behind rose in front of her as she steadied the ladder. She passed him a lantern to hook onto Genderblender's topmost bar representing the rim of an Osterizer.

"Like this, Miss Frances?"

"Yah, awriiiiiite, bye, good job. Reach around to yer left to haaang the next." She passed him another to complete the task. When he stood at her side again after bypassing the last three rungs with a leap and a whoop, his smile warmed her heart. She waved to his dad and mom to help her collapse the ladder. Dexter's dad hefted it into his SUV of ancient vintage, smaller than a Hummer but not by much. The trend was now for mini SUVs, an oxymoron but she didn't care. Moley's Mrsdm tunneler was her ride of choice these days.

"Ahhh, me, y'all doooooon't miss a chance to help. May the Father, Lord Of All The Earth, keep y'all from aches and paaains."

Dexter's dad rubbed his back. "I'll take him up on that, Miss Frances. Say goodbye, Dexter."

Dexter's mom muttered to Frances, woman to woman. "Helping you gets them both out of the house on a regular basis, Miss Frances." She nodded at the china hutch protected by a bright blue tarp, only a little the worse for wear in last week's late winter rains. "That's a nice piece."

"It's a memory too precious to discaaaard, y'know?" It had been a long time since she felt the need to confide in someone outside her faith or Moley; casual chats like this resembled confessions made to seatmates on bus rides: venting with no consequences.
"I can imagine. Well, good luck on this weekend's business."

Frances had fewer worries than before, so she picked up the woman's optimism even though Dexter's mom trod a different path than Santeria. "May the orichas hear you, missus. Have a nice weekend, yerself." The family vehicle sped off and Frances got ready for her workday.

Living partly as she was as a survivalist, Miss Frances's Lantern Festival day began as her days began since two weeks ago: a comfortable stretch on a memory foam mattress topper one story underneath her Moon Rocket attraction, a swig from bottled water, and a check on her calendar to plot the next visit from Moley. She remained grateful to him for ever so much: electricity and an odorless privy powered by his mysterious hmdo, running PVC water pipes underground from her lot's lone spigot to furnish a cramped shower, and ever and always, mushrooms of all sorts dropped off in her equally cramped kitchen. Morels stayed high on the list of favorites; she sauted and diced them and made frittatas with them. Luckily, New York's Social Services listened to her plea to provide SNAP food benefits so she bought meat, greens and her ever loved snickerdoodles. She hadn't observed Moley eating meat; the question of does he eat bats? she was content to leave to speculation. He displayed delicacy for her sensibilities at the oddest times, so she didn't want to push things with a rude question.

Today's first visitor spoke Mandarin at her and the next one spoke Vietnamese; she smiled and waved at family groups as well as individuals. "Gong hay fat choy!" she greeted. A few purists scowled at her pronunciation while others smiled and waved back. An extra gregarious man who wasn't Asian clapped her on the back and told her to let go of the problems of the past year. She grew thoughtful at that and when an elderly woman gifted her a neat packet of dumplings, she listened patiently through the woman's life story of departing Hangzhou to becoming Overseas Chinese on the island of Mauritius, of all places. Frances wondered where her own odyssey would end. The woman winked at the finish of her story and poked Frances in the over familiar way of elders of any kind.

"You walk the streets tonight, lady?"

Frances dropped her persona. "What? I've never --- "

"Sorry, sorry, wrong words, I am stupid. My English bad. Lantern Festival lets ladies and gentlemans stroll about looking for love." The woman grinned. "So get going tonight, eh? Allow me to demonstrate." She twitched her hips arthritically from a long ago seductive waggle. "Like this, get you mans every time."

Miss Cleo came to the rescue. "I am done with maaans, girl. Forever and ever, at least in the way y'all mean."

The ancient one cackled and Frances joined in, shaking her head at the other's insistence. At last the dame rejoined her extended family as they studiously interpreted each piece. Frances gave the spiel again and again, embroidering the tales for each mechanical memento in her collection. Someone asked about her china hutch and she dodged the question. It didn't feel right to either lie or discuss
her mother with strangers. At end of day, her till sparkled with coins and rustled with bills. Oyá granted her a good business today on her special day of the week, Friday.

Tonight Godmother Felicity initiated her into receiving the Warriors; tonight her sacrifice of a duck promised to please all the spirits, in particular Eleguá, Ogun, Oshosi and Osun. Yes, those warriors she would receive and not get, as she had earlier believed. Felicity recognized the spiritual progress of her goddaughter with a nod and smile when Frances admitted she confused the two concepts; Frances had nearly wept with joy to learn she was to meet them after work.

She played with her eleke, brushing the beads as gently as handling a rosary in other times. Oyá opened her eyes to humility regarding sacrifices and instead of blowing all her ready cash on a costly pig, she chose a white Mandarin duck. The duck squatted in its wicker cage, enjoying its last day on earth by nibbling duck chow messily.

"Frawnces."

"Oh you, popping up like that. You startled me." Frances squatted by the duck, who ignored her. "It was a good day, Moley."

"If Frawnces says so, it must be so." He squatted next to her. "Dinner?"

"Uh, yes, for Godmother Felicity and the family. The meat goes to us and the blood to the Warriors. I don't expect you to understand."

"Pzm."

"I'm assuming you don't give two pins about my meeting the Warriors, but that's okay. Team Rocket blasts off anyway soon for Howe Caverns, right?"

Moley rose, brushing off the dirt from his overcoat that was forever too large for his frame. He studied her. "Frawnces smart."

"Thanks. And?"

"Frawnces pretty."

"Frawnces recognizes flattery when she hears it, Moley. We'll leave right after the Chinese Awakening of the Insects Festival on March 5th as agreed. Chinatown websites and banners advertised for their community to include Funkytown as a part of their celebration, so said many visitors today, and I am antsy to make a good impression." He reached down to pet her silver hair before she could stand. She brushed his hand away softer than a slap, but not by much. Something was up.
"Want story?"

"Maaaan, I gots till eight p.m. Mosey on." Haltingly, with patchy translations on both sides, the story came out that Moley attended meetings occasionally with other alpha leaders and he was due to visit a dolphin mastermind in a week. Frances picked up on her place in Moley's scheme of things when he asked to reschedule their trip.

"Dolphin genius my flpr. We dig each other's problems. Whash you say, Frawnces?"

Hmm, Mom always said that it takes three weeks for any man to take any woman for granted. Moley's timing supported the statement. "I say I need the Warriors in my life. After tonight, they'll live by my front door." This development was disappointing yet not crushing. She would deal. "Oh wait, I don't have a front door. They'll live by my front airlock, then." She pointed. "Under Moon Rocket."

Moley thought a long time. "Who they?"

"To you, they will look like cookware because you will see a cauldron and various ceramic pieces but to me, they show where four of my gods live. Each Monday, I clean them and coat them with palm oil, I ask them questions and I give them rum, water, or cigars even if I do not like their answers. That's the way religion goes."

"They drink and smoke?"

Frances smiled. "In the spirit world, yes. My new home shelters more than just me and sometimes you." She jangled her bracelets. "A shrine, Moley, makes a tunnel a proper home. Do you understand?" He wouldn't, or couldn't.

"I think yes." He squeezed her shoulder. "I go now. Many blpt to travel."

There was more to be said. "All right, if you can't spend the night, you can't. I need to welcome Felicity and my friends soon anyway. It'll be the first time they see my home."

A guarded look swept his face and he blinked rapidly behind his goggles. "You show tunnel to umprl?"

"Naturally, with the airlock block in place at the far end of my space in it, why?" Uh oh, he wrung his hands and hummed to himself, never a good sign.

"Whash you tell them about me?"
She relayed what she had rehearsed. "If you had stayed, I had planned to tell them that you are my friend who has helped me. They don't need to know anything else and your kingdom stays secure. I wouldn't spill my guts to them about us. Moley, the orichas allow for privacy, so relax. I am no child; I don't give Tee Em Eye, that is, Too Much Information, add the term to your word list, my drzhp."

His shoulders dropped in relief. "Frawnces my drzhp, too."

"Aw, yeah, we're agreed." She pushed his chest. "The journey begins, so go. Oh, and if you spot any penguins, bring one back for me to sacrifice." The duck quacked as if it understood. "Sorry, duck, your time is up in an hour. Go on, Moley, I need to get busy. I'll see you when I see you."

"Cmloops!"

IOIOIOIOIOII
One cloudy midday, Alice's flung bucket of fish passed for lunchtime ambiance on the one day of
the year that is a command, and the date inspired Private to tell Skipper what Marlene had advised.
In the midst of the tête-à-tête, Kowalski and Rico returned from helping Marlene with spring
cleaning for which she had promised them an oyster pie. In a zoo quieter than usual because kids
prepared for their annual statewide proficiency tests, Private gathered his nerve. If he listened hard
enough, he could almost hear the groans as New York City's kids buckled down to study. He
trusted that officials rewarded children with zoo visits and then applied himself to his own
proficiency test. March Fourth, give me gumption, he thought.

Rico's burp hinted of oysters as he headed for the hatch. "Tired nao, 'Kipppaaahh."

Kowalski's eyes were heavy-lidded. "Marlene had us since first light vacuuming, going around her
sink with a toothbrush dipped in Clorox and the rest is hazy except for her scrumptious oyster pie. I
think we regrouted her ceiling at one point. Permission to nap, sir?" He blinked to alertness at
seeing his commander and his commander's love in what Dr. Phil would call *bargaining body
language*. "Unless you need us --- "

"Skippa, this is between you and me --- "

"Nap away, Martha Stewart and Associate. I've got this sitch covered." Skipper and Private
sounded at odds and really, conflict management was beyond Kowalski's abilities at the moment. He
sketched a salute before trudging after Rico. Skipper kicked the hatch cover over the hole to lend
privacy.

"Weren't you done with travel, Private?"

Private sold his plan, deceptively casual. "Welllll, it's just a little road trip for relaxin', innit? Two
days, or three, you're gaga over anythin' in threes --- "

Skipper's mission planning mind went into overtime as he considered the idea fairly. "It'll take four
to make it worthwhile. Rico and Kowalski could cover for me with Faux Skipper and for you with
your adorable plushie. Let's see, three hours by car is about ten hours swimming, if it's close to water
but if it's not --- "

Being Skipper's love was not easy, but then it hadn't been easy for Johnson to explain to Manfredi
how Johnson's dozens of loves were little twinkling stars in the heavens so he wanted to tickle each
one but when he met Manfredi and they clicked as pals, *himmel*! Manfredi was the full moon rising
*jammen*, which outshone twinkles because true platonic heart's companions did stuff like that,
*Herregud!*

"Dai. Ma, che sei grullo?" Manfredi had countered with an affectionate butt slap, so Private
concluded their friendship sailed on despite choppy seas until their watery fates overtook them. If
sharing body warmth over eight continents had led to sharing bodies, would that development have
shattered their brotherly bonds or strengthened them? Private didn't know.

He stepped out with at least as much guts as Johnson, minus Johnson's international playbird history.

"Yesterday Mason said Phil signed it's just a little swim up a creek and the creek is one mile overland
or thereabouts from the cavern and the crystals are gloryoutiful, his word or maybe Mason didn't
translate quite right. Come along with me, Skippa, and we'll chat them up together." Private tugged
Skipper's flipper and found resistance. "I know, I know, you're preferrin' Yellowstone ---"

Ever on the lookout for a break from what he couldn't commit to one hundred percent, Skipper seized on the new idea. "Yellowstone! Perfect for some future trip, you and I will hop on a plane or super blimp or something and take a week off for me to fill the gap in my national parks souvenir thimble collection." He nodded like a Brassard bobblehead doll. "Done and done, babe. Pencil me in for a trip like that."

Logic, emotional logic, was Private's forte as he pondered Marlene's words about quashing uneven play on life's teetertotter. "So you're sayin' you can wait until a future trip, you don't mind puttin' me through the wringer for months or years, much less your own self, when you and I could take Marlene's advice startin' a few days from now --- I see." He crossed his flippers and turned his back. "I see."

Skipper rubbed his neck. "You're yanking my chain or pulling on my heartstrings, I can't figure out which." He glanced at the buttermilk sky. "Every bit of snow's melted for the year in this weird winter, have you noticed?"

"Chitchattin' about the weather now? A bit obvious diversion, honey, but I forgive you."

"I can do subtle, I just don't like to." Skipper was going to rub off some neck feathers if he didn't stop, so he stopped. "Yeah, gloryoutiful, well, about those other things, babe ---"

"They'll work out. I trust Marlene."

Skipper regarded a passing cloud shaped like a halibut and Private thought he was about to yell at it in his trademark fashion, but he didn't. "Hell, I do, too, it's not that, it's, um, oysters? Toys? I have a bad feeling about this trip ---"

"Try? For me?" Private hurried on. "She says oysters are well known as aph-aph-aphrodisiacs although what yaks have to do with anythin' I'm sure I don't know."

Skipper snorted. "Somehow I don't want to mention Sasquatch and you and this sitch in the same sentence. She might have offered good advice, though. She had that experienced look."

Forgiving and forgetting were easier said than done. After nearly a year, Kastelholm returned in nightmares every so often, and Private didn't see that ending anytime soon. His voice hardened. "You mean before or after she tried to kill you and nearly did? Forget about her, Skippa. Think about us drizzlin' oyster glop all over and eatin' oysters after we lick their salty goo off each other and then, then playin' with this." He flourished the dildo sporting its blue ribbon. "It's a ---"

Now came the yell. "I know what the hell it is! She even named the thing! Aw, Private! Seeing it makes the sitch worse! No no no!"

"Whyever not?"

"No. Just no. I told you before that I don't go in for anything fancy like that."

Private whipped the toy behind his back. "And how is that workin' for you, hmmmm?" Sky blue eyes met sapphire ones.

Dammit. Just ... dammit. "No fair."

"Righto, well, no fair to me, either. I'm just tryin' to understand and, and help." Private pivoted to pace like Skipper did every morning before his team to plan the day's missions. Every time his
circuit crossed Skipper's position, he waggled the creamy dildo behind his back until Skipper was forced to look away, up, or down, whatever took the cylinder out of his view. It struck him that this, too, was bedroom maneuvers of a sort, because sex variations played a large part in any adult penguin discussions at the HQ's Nineteenth Hole bar whenever booze flowed and filters relaxed.

He didn't like it when that happened because he couldn't order his peers to change the subject.

"I need to consult my second, no offense, Private. He's napped long enough. I won't have either of them going soft."

Private would take any concession. "I'm good with that."

IOIOIOIOIO

In the cavern-like lair of Central Park Zoo's squad of commando penguins, soft sounds arose from the SuperKing bunk. For once, Rico emitted no bodily noises but Kowalski did. He sighed, grunted, and tittered in his sleep while his mind took flight from one of Skipper's confidences about a solo mission that had gone south, or rather, east. The dream constructed by a penguin genius' brain involved a hotel room in the sovereign nation of Japan and was as far from solo as it got...

"Well, Rico, what shall it be this time? We've done the Groaning Water Buffalo Position, the Peanut Butter Wally Winkie Man Ticklefight Position, the Burmese Heptagon Augmented By Scented Candles Position --- "


"I could? I mean, yes, I could. That's right, I've never --- we've never in all these months had me being the one, er, breaching --- now why is that --- "

The two furrowed their brows, thinking hard, and then shrugged at each other. "That's right, I've not done you that particular vanilla way," mused Kowalski. He chuckled. "I like spicy cinnamon lattes topped with Mexican crema. Skipper got me started with that flavor, er, never mind how --- "

"C'mon already."

Kowalski put on the face that used to aggravate Doris but generally entranced Rico. "Impatient, are we? I like that in a lover. Ow! What was that for?"

"FuhgeddaboutKippppaaaaahhhh."

"I never thought I'd hear you say those words, Rico. You must be on fire."

Rico's face said it all, a twisted mix of lust and frustration topped with a dollop of edginess. He placed his flippers on his hips with an escalating growl.

"Nao."

Kowalski acted on unconsidered impulse as he listened to his gut. He shoved Rico on top of the white chenille bedspread and obliterated his form while smothering him with his own taller body. Rico giggled until Kowalski squirmed into a sixty-nine position to do delightful things. Rico lay dazed after five minutes, breathing heavily.

An observer outside the dream would have seen Rico lying still as stone while Kowalski muttered unintelligible words.
"Yes, I know I've been inside you, Rico, but that was when you went marshmallow and ate me --- oh not like that, stop it with the innuendoes and take your tongue off your flipper --- so you can understand why I hesitate." Kowalski had prepared Rico the best he knew how and still waffled about doing the actual deed. "You'll tell me if I hurt you?"

"MzPerkyduzzitwiffer ---"

"I don't want to hear about what you and Miss Perky did with anything. The blow up lifesize Skipper doll was enough to contemplate involving the both of you, for Kunis's sake." The bedsprings creaked as he lay beside his lover. "Noisy bed in these old hotels," he said with an experimental bounce, "but I discovered that the creaks help keep up rhythm when you get going."

Rico shoved Kowalski away with a commanding flipper and a disdainful sniff. "Wifwho?"

Kowalski pictured Rico's pouty lower beak in the semi darkness and wanted to lick it. "Not your business. You're the one I'm interested in now, or do you want to draw a picture for me in detail about what you got up to in Guatemala?"

"Hnmph. Diffnt." Rico wriggled away until he no longer touched Kowalski.

Kowalski's dream self missed the contact of slick preened feathers and seductive body heat. "Different how? Because Xochi was a female? Let's face it, neither of us are each other's firsts." He rolled onto his stomach and waggled his butt. "Do you want to do me, instead?" It was a way out, it was a comfortable thing, and Kowalski could put off what he was nervous about. Yes, it was an excellent option. He held his breath without seeming to.

"Nah." At last, some progress was being made and they two would arrive at the playcation destination their love boat was predestined for. Rico flipped onto his back and spread his legs. "Reddy." Kowalski slid inside Rico and couldn't stop a groan.

A matching moan sounded from their commander on the other half of the queen-size bed. Near the headboard, Skipper's neck was pinned to the mattress by Private's beak in the traditional Routine Thirty-Four: Stay Still Until I Am Finished.

Rico and Kowalski paused their own encounter as they watched Private hammer Skipper into the shaking bedsprings. The counterfeit deutschemarks that faulty intel trusted were real fluttered around the two. Through the gloom enhanced by the closed vertical blinds, shadows claimed most of the action and they were too respectful to move closer or even squint much at the lovemaking. They did see, however, that Skipper's eyes darkened to a glazed indigo with pleasure. The strobing lights of Kyoto's Nishiki Fish Market district showed them that much.

How fortunate they had been that the hotel stood alone in the district and that delectable perfume of hundreds of varieties of fish met their nostrils all hours of the day and night. Although closing time neared for the markets, the neon signs still flared primary colors in Kyoto wintertime splendor.

"Cor, I'm close," gritted out Private and Skipper moaned louder as he raked the sheets with his flippertips.

Kowalski whimpered, "Gah, that is so hot I can't even --- " Rico made a distressed sound of abandonment and Kowalski renewed his attentions.

It was a once in a lifetime event that they all came together and they knew it. Skipper's Log entry merely stated, "Missions accomplished. 'Nuff said ..."

The dream ended as Kowalski jerked awake when Skipper grabbed his pinkie claw. "Enough
beauty sleep, soldier. Up and at 'em."

Clouds of fatigue parted slowly. "Huh?"

"I need intel pronto about an upstate road trip to Howe Caverns for me and the private. Can your fancy schmancy cell phone tell us the way when you won't be along? You know how the team treasures your sense of direction."

The dream that inspired half awake Kowalski to consider doing his love in real life using the traditional going-all-the-way fashion of untutored, non-commando penguins came about, he was certain, because of the closeness of their anniversary. Yes, it had been almost one year since Rico bowled him over with a passion-driven tackle in the watermelon snow on Fasta Island. Possibilities with Rico that only existed on the fringe of mad science with Doris flooded his groggy mind. Hmmm, the female principle experiment progressed decently and humans took nearly one year to ---

"Generate GPS from your phone? Is that an option, Kowalski? Wake up, man!"

Kowalski blinked slowly. "Huh, um. Apologies, sir. Er, yes, GPS uses driving apps like on the cab that we commandeered to deliver the pizzas on time and although using it for hiking hasn't been an option until now, I'm sure Phil could keyword search and find out how."

"Howe?"

"No, sir, how to find Howe."

"Hmmph, that place needs renaming. Put it on my agenda."

"Of course, sir, behind making St. Urho's Day a national holiday, or before?"

"Before. Survival in the wild comes first."

"It's done, sir."

"Wake Rico and let's move out to Simian Space."

Mason and Phil proved too large to navigate the building's air ducts, so a discreet kaboom at the Zoovenir shop's back door allowed everyone entrance during the zoo clerk's break time. The two chimps took up usual positions, their rapport more contentious than usual. Three minutes after beginning an internet search, Phil covered his wide mouth and laughed as he signed to Mason.

It was obvious that Mason's tutoring of his partner in the finer points of manners had its limits. "Phil! You can't say that to them!"

Phil nodded hard enough to rattle his brains.

Mason slapped hands on narrow hips. "Now don't start with me."

Phil waggled his thumbs as he made kissy sounds.

"Stop bringing up my mother, for the love of --- " Private had to bridge this communication gap before Skipper lost ground to slippy slide from Maybe, Babe Territory into the No-No Zone. As unofficial morale officer, it was his duty.

"Say, um, Phil, wot were you goin' to say, I mean sign? We're tough. We can take it."
Protect echoed throughout the hallways of Skipper's shuttered mind as he twisted the rod to open the shutters to new ideas. "We're so tough that we don't need to prove we're tough, so we make like we're not so tough. Butter us up, simians."

Jaws dropped. "I don't believe I heard you correctly," said Mason as Phil used both hands to shut his mouth with a snap. "Did you change places with the real Skipper?"

Phil leaped down from his stool at the check out stand. The stand's computer hummed quietly as the internet does what the internet does best, asking questions for intelligent animals to ponder. "gps coveskill creek howe caverns how far from central park zoo not howe far but how far" flashed in the google search box. Phil seized Skipper's head to look deeply into his eyes. He flung a sign to Mason before resuming his place on the stool.

"Phil says it's really you."

Private couldn't believe the situation was going as well as it was until now. Minimal yelling and cursing for the win, as he had heard Mason quote Phil in internet speak at one point. He had his beak open to reply indignantly when Skipper beat him to the karate punch. "Of course it's me. No zapping to change my personality or funny camouflage suits, by O'Brien's King Kong glory, we're here to dig out answers, so spill the pinto beans, Phil."

"Skippa?" He would have to fix a thing or two about the squeak in his voice, but that day was not today.

"Private?" Skipper imitated the squeak with a wink and a grin.

Skipper appeared more decisive than ten minutes ago, something devoutly to be wished. Private relaxed. This trip would actually happen. Kowalski and Rico could have a private little vacation from two teammates, a bonus for them to be sure, and he and his love could enjoy couple time with no missions.

"It's a right go, then?"

"It is. Onward to planning the battle, er, agenda, er, I mean itinerary. Phil, if you will." And so the deed was accomplished and the instructions given for travel. The basics turned out quite simple, actually, because swimming up the Hudson to the Mohawk to Schoharie Creek sounded doable.

Phil got straight to the business of finetuning more detailed information for the phone's download.

"Hmm," mused Skipper, "I'd still like your smartphone, Kowalski, since you're guarding the home front along with Rico. Can you instruct us in the doodadery protocols enough to function one way, at least? We'll return the same way."

"Wise choice, sir. Your trip will be a test of our inborn penguin navigational abilities versus GPS."

Kowalski blushed under his feathers at Skipper's next comment. "So you'll make the trip, too, in a figurative sense. Good thinking, soldier."

"D'aww, shucks." Kowalski turned as Mason chivied Phil.

"Phil, they don't want Exit 21 from Interstate 88, they'll be swimming up a creek, not driving. Try again."

Phil's ears burned red. He tightened his lips and pounded on the keyboard. "Phil, you're indispensable to this trip," burst in Kowalski. "We appreciate you." Dr. Phil always said don't build yourself up by tearing others down or maybe it was somebody else. Kowalski leaped onto the check
out stand, careful to not entangle himself in the cable connecting his phone with the magic of the computer.
Phil, Mason, and Kowalski consulted, tabulated, and entered data on the smartphone for the next ten minutes.

The technobabble soared over Rico's head. "Boringrody," he grunted.

"A vacation in the Catskills, honey! Ooooh! I can hardly wait!"

Skipper addressed Rico's grump before his love's rhapsody. "Rico, technology is not your thing or mine but it's theirs and we're tough enough to deal with boredom, right?"

"Yahguesso."

Private had stars in his eyes, the darling. "Well, Private, you got your way ---"

"For the two of us, my way's right as rainbows."

"Um, I suppose. Onto practicalities." Skipper eyed the inventory before pointing to a rack. "I requisition that waterproof backpack. Rico, buy it from petty cash."

"'Kay." Rico fetched down the Hello Kitty backpack to a delighted squeal from Private, a snort from Skipper and a meh from himself. He spewed the correct payment to the penny by the cash register.

Mason, Phil, and Kowalski linked appendages when the work concluded as Kowalski crowed, "A learning curve! Phil says that the GPS coordinates are Latitude: 42.69484° N and Longitude: 74.39975° W with an elevation of 1017.8 feet! I was way off! I thought it was 1018.3 feet! Ha ha!" Phil, Mason, and he high-fived and high-oned, respectively.

"Yeah, I was worried about the extra six inches. So we rely on our ingrown navigational penguin abilities, however the hell they work, and your smartapple smartphone. Win win."

Private donned the backpack, jigging and jogging his way around the store. He drummed a tattoo on the plastic bin filled with plushy replicas of himself until one plopped into his grasp. "Skippa, I want one of these new ones for my body double when I'm away!"

"Indulge the b--- uh, man, Rico."

Rico burped more cash until he wheezed. "Outtanry."

"We'll take a dip into the wishing fountain on the way back and restock with coins, what say, group?"

Kowalski shook his head. "Not me. Phil wants to share a fascinating theory on how our beaks coordinate with our brain's trigeminal nerve using magnetite clumps to sense the dip in the angle that the earth's magnetic field makes with the ground, which indicates latitude, a supremely important part of navigation." Phil danced side to side in the way that chimps did, knocking his knuckles to the ground emphatically. He and Kowalski exchanged glances in purest Nerdese.

"Do tell. Mason, are you up for more gobblety translation?"

Mason sighed. "Blackmail works every time, Skipper." But the look the two chimps shared spoke of less shallow connections. "It's for Science!" Heavy footsteps sounded and the six animals beat feet for the store's back door.
"Boy, being salaried isn't everything it's cracked up to be, Maurice," came a voice both nasal and complaining. "Zoovenir's clerk left early and I'm on bean counter duty in the store till six. Take a hint and stay on hourly status, pal." Alice listened a minute on her walkie talkie. "Well right it's mainly sitting around duty, but still --- yeah I'm in a magical place stop asking --- good for you --- McSlade won last Tuesday in a landslide huh who cares --- "

Alice's conversation cut off as Rico eased the door shut. "Shesmellznny."

"How, compadre?"

The explosives expert shrugged eloquently.

"I don't know what to make of it. Maybe something serious goes on with Alice. Maybe we shouldn't leave the zoo just now --- "

"Skippa, do you trust Kowalski and Rico and, and me to take over in your absence or d-demise?"

"No doubts at all."

"Then wotever comes up with the zoo, Alice, or the spider monkeys' planned St. Patrick's Day rampage can and will be handled without you, hypothetically. I need you to come with me to Howe. Agreed?"

A beat. "Agreed."

"You hesitated, sir."

"Did you expect me not to, Kowalski?"

"Not really, no."

"Then your assumption is correct. Happy?"

Private stepped up as morale officer for everyone, including the chimps. "Over the moon! Yay! We're off on St. Urho's Day! Yay! Road trip!"

IOIOIOIOIOIO
Chapter 32

Three days after the Lantern Festival, Frances prepared alone for the Festival of Awakening Insects From Hibernation. She raided the Fourth Street Food Co-op for Chinese pancakes using her SNAP card, cut them into bite-sized pieces and set them out in two Blue Willow pattern bowls by the entrance to Funkytown. The blue bowls from Mom's china hutch made her smile; how Mom would have enjoyed the challenge of attracting visitors! A social soul her mom had been. *Time for parties, time to part ways,* she'd always claimed, and *there is no substitute for solitude.* Frances inherited the adaptable mindset and was glad of it.

The sun fought a losing battle with scudding clouds and Science predicted rain tonight. Frances ticked off the days in her mind's eye until Moley's return. Hmmm, the 10th of March should work to plan the Howe trip, but not too tightly. She'd allow one week leeway to take pressure off her and him. The 17th, certainly; if he'd not come back then, she'd worry for him. One thing Moley lacked as a friend was a cell phone or the ability to use even a pay phone. If serious events overtook him, how would she know? If he never visited again to flatter her and make her think *somebody wants me,* her life would be as poor in friendship as it was in dollars. That condition would suck donkey balls, one of Mom's pithy sayings.

Santeria emphasized joy in the moment, and yes, Frances felt joy at the prospect of an uncommon profitable weekday. She perched the porcelain dragon from the hutch beside the bowl and closed the hutch door before covering its glass front with the blue tarp again. Santeria also required sacrifice and she'd not yet sacrificed to Oshosi to thank him for the gift of Dexter and his family. She tucked away the thought of payment until later, but not *too* much later. Oshosi loved hunting and art and cooked pig and goat, not necessarily in that order. She'd sacrifice a goat, yes that was what she'd do now that her fortunes rose. She ought to get a good one for fifty bucks. She turned at a genteel clearing of the throat.

"Hello," said a dragon. "Can I have a pancake?"

"Suuuure, maaaan."

The dragon for the Festival dance contained two people, sort of appropriate when you thought about it: the Festival also celebrated Fuxi and Nüwa, fraternal twins who created humanity. They were husband and wife in a tale to rival Greek mythology's whackadoo family of Olympians. Bodies of snakes and torsos of humans with a DNA profile that must give fits to scientists, she snickered to herself and then popped a bite of pancake onto the man's tongue through the hole of the dragon's mouth.

"Thanks. I didn't want to take off my head." The dancer smacked his lips behind his mask. "Good stuff, you know, really good job with the nosherei."

Frances reached under the skirt of the dragon to give pancake to the man manipulating the body and
tail of the performance dragon. "Yeahhh, gentlemens, we open in ten minutes. Give it all you gots."

The dragon nodded and his voice rang with authority. "We're just getting going in the dragon dance business. Thanks for letting us perform."

"Aaaaanytime, maaaaan, aaaaanytime." Frances indicated the Genderblender. "I know Funkytown aaaaain't no temple, but my sculpture is temple-shaped, riiiiight?"

The green head nodded. "It will do in a mini-me pinch for a Taihao Temple Fair, yep." Frances received the impression that these performers could pull off a small yet complete dragon dance to please anyone's aesthetics.

She was proven correct when the first visitor straggled in, looking harried and speaking little English. The visitor chatted up the dragon in Mandarin and seemed pleased with the conversation. She gestured to her tour group waiting on the sidewalk. A dozen traveling souls stepped onto the colorful interlocking rubber mats of Funkytown's pathways in the rainy season, taking photos along the way.

"Haaaaaaa, dragon, you move me, maaan, you do indeed." Frances stepped out, beaming. She welcomed the group with a universal smile and wave. She followed the lead of the tour group guide, smiling at the right spots of the dance, applauding at others. How cleverly the two dancers used the rubber mats to fall upon while supporting the dragon superstructure in their complex routine! Did this imply that a dragon bent to circumstances while never breaking?

Surely Oyá and the Warriors residing in her underground home would not begrudge a visit from courageous neighboring spirits. A religion that syncretized Oshosi with Saint Norbert of Xanten proved as flexible as anyone could want.

IOIOIOIOIO

Two hundred twelve patrons and twenty six hundred and four dollars later, Frances closed up shop. Adrift in a happy, solvent world blessed by owó, she pressed the gift bag of fragrant herbs depending from a string around her neck. From between her breasts, the scent of lavender, cloves and unidentifiable spices rose like aromatherapy. Life was good. She glimpsed her reflection in Moon Rocket's polished exterior curve.

"I'm up for some me-time, Frances, how about you?"

"Yes, Frances, being alone after such a crowd feels dope." Frances closed the hatch to the Moon Rocket behind her, trod down fifteen steps to her cozy home and saluted the orichas by her door lightheartedly. "It's Tuesday and I fed you yesterday, but here's a treat." She crumbled a Maduro cigar equally over the spirits' homes of cauldron and ceramic pots. They remained silent, likely enjoying the tobacco in the spirit world. Tobacco had always calmed her and helped her to think when she smoked Luckies. Funny, she'd outgrown the habit. She kept other habits, however, for
their comfort in a home to which she wasn't yet one hundred percent accustomed.

Chinese pancakes filled her gut for lunch, someone gave her prawn eggrolls for dinner and after licking the sweet sour sauce from her fingers, she played Candy Crush Saga for half an hour. No underground reception meant no emails, no voicemails, no spam, just soothing quiet. Ahhhh. Cramped space meant the kitchen abutted the sleeping space, which abutted the bathroom. She prepared for relaxation by drawing the curtains to both ends and secluded the sleeping area from eating and the aftereffects of eating. She changed out of Miss Frances’ business casual muumuu into her birthday suit, leaving on the sachet bag of exotic odors but removing her nine copper bracelets and eleke. She reclined on the memory foam. The stores already sold Easter candy so she settled down with a Cadbury orange creme egg.

She plugged her phone into the antenna wire she'd strung from the top of Moon Rocket into her living quarters. Music from her Samsung playlist eased the labor of the day into the sultry atmosphere of a primal cave. Paul Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo rendered *Diamonds On The Sole Of Her Shoes* to the live performance clip on YouTube, complete with shuffling steps by caftaned singers. Oh, yes, Frances, build yourself some comfort. She wadded her shed clothing under each arm, squirming to get into the mood.

Frances flexed her fingers.

Who was to be her partner this time? A movie star? A recording artist? Someone she'd seen at the festival? She pondered. One or two male faces appealed from today, but nobody wowed her fancies. She twirled her tongue in her Cadbury egg filling. How about the dragon men? They had performed, she'd seen them paid from afar by her contact in Chinatown's publicity agency, and yet she'd not glimpsed their faces clearly. Their bodies were another matter; lithe and athletic, they had leaped, rolled and arched to make the dragon live inside its papier-mâché scales and PVC frame. Then they had left for another dancing gig. Yes, they would do nicely.

Frances scrunched around to make a supporting foam roll for her knees and spread her legs. Playing with her curls, she wandered into the land of make believe. She stroked soft as a kitten's purr and then rolfed her lips, which parted accommodatingly. She teased herself, closing her eyes to reality while allowing the cavelike atmosphere of her home to sweep over her like a wave from Hoboken Zoo's cheese fountain. Yellow, creamy and warm, the cheese cloaked her body with a sensuality not generally seen in an cave-aged cheddar. She had to stop before she got to the good part because this was happening too fast. She winked at the handsome dragon dancers who bowed over her bed. Chill, Frances, she thought; think of Jeff.

Jeff. Ugh. All desire fled, as she'd wished. She took the downtime from her fantasy to rearrange her pillow and plump the arm supports again. There, fresh start. The cheese vanished as the 52 degree Fahrenheit chill ruffled her nipples. She dragged a coverlet over her, laughing a little at the mental image she projected. No, tension release via laughter was just fine but not this time. She sobered and stole one hand downward, parting her lips with the other. One finger and then two dipped inside, circling to widen the opening to admit three. Oh, oh yeah. On the right track. The dragon dancers advanced to lie one to either side, observing but not touching her. On a whim, she gave faces to each: Soon Teck-Oh and Burt Kwouk. Their youthful appearances varied from the venerable years of one and the state of being dead of the other, but what else was fantasy for?
The playlist meandered on schedule to Tristan and Isolde’s *Liebestod*, too classic to be cliché. Frances ventured her hand in and out, gaining slickness slowly as the desire grew. The orchestral strings began to change, scaling one level and then the next. Other strings joined in until the crescendo was next.

No, still too fast. She shifted the playlist to replay from the beginning. Artie Shaw led his orchestra to *Begin The Beguine* and Frances hit her first peak at his clarinet’s climax, a mere ripple of pleasure, soon subsiding. Next, Kraftwerk's *The Man Machine* provided the perfect stasis music to her afterglow as she gathered strength for her ultimate assault on the summit. The dancers moved smoothly into action, rolling one full breast and then the other, avoiding bumping their hands as they supported themselves on crooked elbows. Their lean forms aroused Frances and her flanks felt the evidence of their matching arousal. She whimpered through a romantic *Apple Blossom Time* from the Andrews Sisters before submitting to the dancers' dual attack on her clit with clever ephemeral fingers. She groaned and broke into a sweat underneath the coverlet before tossing it onto the floor, her back arching. She stilled her own fingers before the big moment could overtake her.

Not yet, she didn't want to come yet. Another break in the rhythm as she readjusted her elbow supports and plumped her pillow. Would she hear the predicted rain through the Moon Rocket? The last rain was technically a light shower and she’d slept through it. She listened and ahah, soft pit pats grew louder as the evening turned into a late spring humid night. What a mindless presence Nature was, just right for reverting to animal activities such as this. She frowned.

Santeria appreciated Nature, so she did, too; actually, she always had, it was just the dirty element of it that proved bothersome because the aesthetics of Nature touched her soul. Nature's raw, primeval life and death entwined in a dragon dance, one leading, one following and then reverse. The animal sacrifices of Santeria portrayed the dynamic as well as anything Frances had observed in the zookeeper phase of her life. Wait, hold on a minute. If a goat sacrifice pleased Oshosi, why wouldn't a penguin? The species was duck-like, after all. Oh right, Godmother Felicity said that sacrifices must stay within farm animal parameters. Huh. Could she push the boundaries of Santeria by positing that somewhere in Antarctica someone raised penguins?

Frances shook her head. Enough obsessing with penguins. The dancers morphed into one dancer, strong and sure as he pushed her knees apart before draping her legs over his shoulders. He settled inside her thighs as he nudged his cock through her folds at her gasp of pleasure. Oh my goodness, he had kept on the mask! Good thing it was not his face that tickled her fancy right now. He pumped in her imagination and she thrust back in reality, plunging shaky fingers inside to feel her trim lips swell to fat, slick ones. She thrashed, climbing towards the mountaintop, closing her eyes to her surroundings and opening them to the fantasy's climax. The dancer bent the mouth of his mask to a nipple, brushing the papier-mâché construction on a crinkled tip before sucking it roughly through the opening. He nibbled.

Frances yowled like a Red Rhodesian slasher and came, arching upwards before slumping back. She panted, massaging her right forearm. The bag around her neck absorbed streaming sweat to bloom its succulent scents throughout her curtained bedchamber, where they blended with her own sexy smell. Heavens to Betsey, that had been what she needed.
A warm shower, or should she succumb to slumber first? She slung her legs to the floor, heading for the spray after removing the bag of spices. Maybe she didn't hate filthy animals as much as two years ago, but she refused to stay dirty in her person when she could fix it.

She yawned and stretched in the shower, thankful beyond words to Moley for installing it. She fingered her shampooey hair, back to its natural blonde until she could decide on a new color for the new month of March. Puce? Strawberry? Brown, a favorite of Oyá's? She asked for a relevant dream from the oricha after yawning again.

Kathump. Screeeeech. What was that? Was Moley returned so early? "I'm in the shower, hold on. Um, I am naked, close your eyes, would you?" She squeaked open the shower curtain and edged around the toilet, shielding her important bits. "Moley?"

No answer. She strode the six steps to the tiny closet by her bed. Grabbing her slippers before knotting the robe around her, she approached the end of her space that was closed off from the main tunnel by a cycling airlock that irised open at her command. Out of a sense of protection, she clutched her iruke to her chest. "Moley?"

Still no answer. "Moleeeeeeeey! If this is a practical joke, it's the first one you've played on me. Moleeeeeeey!"

Ten minutes later, Frances had traversed thirty cautious steps into the main tunnel and back, closed the airlock, rummaged through closet and kitchen cupboard, ascended the steps into Moon Rocket and danced around the vintage kiddie ride in the darkness and rain. She jigged counterclockwise about the opening to her precious home, squashing some snails on the rubber mat as she whirled the iruke over her head.

She returned to her dwelling to shed her wet clothing and soggy slippers. She paused at her makeshift door. "Warriors, protect my home. Protect me from harm, protect my friend from harm, protect my livelihood from harm. Oyá, grant me kincamaché." No time for a proper invocation beyond a simple, hummed moyugbar; this heartfelt supplication would have to do. She scrubbed at her eyes, feeling sleepy once more after the surge of adrenaline. No noises met her ears, no intruders in view ... likely it was atmospheric changes in humidity that produced metallic creaks and crashes. Yes that was it.

She slept well, considering. Her requested dream suggested she ought to color her hair deepest brown and shade her temples white.

IOIOIOIOIO
"I gave up on talking to the spider monkeys before Christmas, sir, why do you ask?"

Skipper stroked his beak. "Rumor has it that they're planning something big on St. Patrick's Day."

Kowalski frowned. "I don't know how they're spreading rumors. When I asked them about gift giving advice, they acted as a hive mind and all answered at once, sounding cranky. What with their Brazilian Portuguese accent, I couldn't understand them. There doesn't seem to be a leader to interface with. The troupe is unlike anything we've encountered, even the nasty hornets." He paused. "Is there a need to invent a universal translator, because I could start designs --- "

The team quietened as Skipper thought, tapping his forehead. "Maybe. One of your doodads could help if we interrogate the source, because rumors can start by somebody's whackadoo imagination."

Kowalski hung his head. "I know I've been guilty of that in other times, sir, but I've really tried to stay down to earth in the past year --- "

Rico shifted his weight, ready to instinctively defend his love, then he stood down from high alert. Who would he attack, anyway? This was just talk and yes, Kowalski got the gold medal for high jumping to conclusions. He settled for an unsettling neutral expression as he awaited developments.

Skipper was a leader; Skipper would not hurt his men. He would die for them.

Skipper could roll his eyes with the best of them, too. "What the deuce? Who said it was you? Burt loves gossip and he's got that whole artistic thing going on, you know how artists are with their screwball airhead notions, er, I'm leaving Marlene and you, Rico, out of that analogy oh you know what I mean let's move along." He paced, flippers clasped behind him. The pleasant Wednesday spring morning provided a crowd of school groups, each chattering and shuffling along from one habitat to the next. After three acrobatic water routines that made the kiddies squeal, the team enjoyed a break as the commander strove to clean up loose ends before departing on leave.

"If they break out, they could do real damage to people and property. I mean, have you seen their fangs? Plus their grabby little digits and grabby little tails, it's downright uncanny how their tails act like hands." Skipper shivered. "Ew."

Kowalski dredged up a Dr. Phil saying to save vacation plans from destruction by an overactive imagination that wasn't, for once, his. "Dr. Phil says 'I don't trust words. I even question actions. But I never doubt patterns.' Sir, the monkeys transferred in at the same time as the dwarf fainting goats. Both groups pattern as pains in the pinfeathers, wouldn't you agree?"

"Mmmf. Suppose so."

Kowalski warmed to his subject. "And as Routine Two says, we don't need to like or I-love everybody, it's adequate to tolerate. Right?"

"Yeah yeah. Your point?"

Kowalski trumped his commander's ace. "Whether the spider monkeys riot or not is in doubt. Doubt is the ruination of pleasant times like vacations. Don't you doubt, sir, that Rico and I can handle whatever arises."
Silence reigned for one full minute. "Still doesn't tell me how the rumors started."

"I doubt that we'll ever find out," Kowalski said blithely. "It doesn't really matter. ESP emanations from spider monkeys like sasquatches are rumored to possess? Divination by ley lines? Since they appear hive-minded, a dance similar to what bees do to indicate pollen sources? I could go on and on."

Skipper smiled at last. "I don't doubt you could. I don't doubt you or Rico's talents, either. All right, Operation: Spelunker Bunker is a go and is that a blimp I see in our future? Boys, look over there!"

"It's bigger than Skorca, Skippa!"

"Sweet!"

"Zinormous!"

The school children couldn't understand penguin talk, but they could follow pointed flippers. "Oooh, cool! A blimp!"

One little boy wearing glasses strutted his stuff. "Yeah uh huh Teach says it's here from Wednesday to Monday. Teach says it'll take pictures of the St. Patrick's Day parade on Saturday and the marathon on Sunday. Teach is running in the marathon."

One little girl wearing glasses set him straight. "Teach says, she says it's a Half Marathon. Awww, it's turning around and we can't see it anymore. Awwww."

The little boy had more to say as he practiced using this week's new vocabulary word in a sentence, to boot. "It's been eons since it visited New York, Teach says. I'll bet it sets down to rest someplace and comes back every day."

The little girl loved to argue, it seems. "A blimp doesn't rest! It's not alive!" Teach shepherded her flock to Marlene's habitat.

Kowalski was beside himself. "Sir, we'll videocam it for you since you're leaving before dawn tomorrow. It's a wonderful, wonderful triumph of engineering!"

"I know, right? Maybe we ought to --- "

"Too bad we'll miss it, but that's life, Skippa." Private had stayed out of the discussion until he had something worthwhile to add. He would brook no delays to this important mission of his devising.

Rico pantomimed running, wiping his brow, hydrating, and running some more. "Yeah, and we'll miss the half marathon on the 18th, too, if we return on Monday. I dunno, babe, what do you say --- "

Now and then Private growled like Rico did.

Skipper shelved his misgivings. "Okayokay, I can take a hint. We leave on schedule." He thought better of adding a "Happy now?" because it wasn't his job to keep his troops happy. The complication of being Private's lover and also his commander did not escape him, but as Private said, such was life. For any penguin past puberty, compromises made life bearable for teams large and small.

Private thought better of pecking Skipper's cheek in gratitude. All would go according to plan, no doubt.
That evening, Private arranged the gift pillow from Uncle Nigel on his bunk before double checking the trip's supplies. Favorite brand of Sardinian sardines? Check. Pillow? No. Canteen? Check. Lunacorn? No. He'd do without cuddling except from Skipper. Marlene's tactic would work at some point in the next five days, he was certain of it.

Skipper focused like a ruby laser on the blimp. Unlike Kowalski, he never thought a super blimp attack would happen, for the behemoths depended on wind to function and he didn't trust wind as a power source, not really. It was too fickle. Tidal power was much more stable and if he ever fell victim to witchcraft and turned human, he'd tell the powers that be to rig tidal turbines.

"Kowalski, lay some intel on me about blimps. I saw you coming back from the chimps' habitat."

Fifteen minutes later, stuffed to the gullet with facts and figures, he zeroed in on the basics of who sponsored the Goodyear blimp from engineers' dream into stately reality. "Who says foreigners don't recognize our American technological superiority and want to hitch their wagon to our stars and stripes, huh baby? So Germany got in on the deal? Good on them." He observed Kowalski clutching his clipboard to his chest in intellectual rapture, which was nicer to see than his second's usual dithery mental state of listing options in a hazardous battle sit. Hey, this vacation would do everyone a world of good! Shake up the team like P.E.L.T. did for its leader! Then when they reunited, they'd be sharper than ever. Yes, he was glad he'd stuck to his guns when Private acted like he wanted to reschedule due to the weekend's delightful activities. Oh that Private, as bad as Ringtail was sometimes when the new and shiny appeared.

"Zeppelin Luftschifftechnik contributed equal parts science, components, and manpower to construct it." Kowalski's tone got nearly as soft as when he cooed to Rico. He showed his drawing of the blimp all around. Rico said "aaah" and Private said "oooh." "Isn't it a thing of beauty?"

"Zipline-Luck-Shit-Technique is all one word?"

"Phil says it's two words, sir."

"Yeah, I was worried about that." Skipper shook his head. "The German language is made for you, mi amigo."

Kowalski executed a mocking bow complete with flourish. "Vielen Dank."

"Aaaand we move along to our exit strategy. Private, we leave at midnight, swim for ten hours past civilization and into the wilderness, by Shinjen's beard!"

Private's smile was indulgent. "Now, Skippa, just because there's no skyscrapers where we're goin' doesn't mean it's uncivilized --- "

"Ah bup bup bup! One question, Private: will there be snowcones at the caverns?"

Private stepped out on a limb. "Maybe not inside them, but you know, a snowcone person like our park's Luigi is bound to cater to guests in the giftshop or thereabouts. Uncle Nigel says there's always a giftshop at these places, so that's where you could shop for thimbles." He sought to tempt away any lingering doubts. "Snowcones, or fudge, or gummi worms could be in stock, too."

Skipper thought some more. "Will there be soan papdi?"

"We'll see." Private hustled past questions he couldn't answer. "Well, then, a rest and off we start." Skipper rolled into his bunk and patted the space beside him.
"No, not tonight. I'm sure the Lady Lumberjackets team stays pure before The Big Game to keep their strength up, and a ten hour swim is a good long workout, eh wot?" Private hadn't mentioned Marlene's final bit of advice.

"Save yourself for the big effort, m'main penguin," she'd said. "A little abstinence makes the heart grow fonder." She'd winked until he wanted to slap her.

"Righto, Marlene. And I'll ask Skippa to give you a full report on how your techniques succeeded, okay?"

Her eyes showed hesitation after her jolt of surprise. "Uh, ya think, Private? I mean, like you said, it's hard to talk about the subject."

The ball was back in his court and he smiled his most innocent smile. "I'm sure he'll wish to thank you properly, Marlene, and you can have the satisfaction of knowin' you were right." She had agreed, brow still a little perplexed.

Back in present times, Private knew his love better than anyone. A twist of the beak in disappointment and then Skipper's discipline came to the fore. "Okay, I can wait. Private, I'm switching out sardines for anchovies. Kowalski, set your mental egg timer for zero hour to wake up us deviled eggs. Rico, prep our backpack with the phone, one extra battery, one blanket, one canteen, four tins of anchovies, and the, er, six oysters yeah that's it okay all done lights out team goodnight." Before anyone could comment, he turned to the inside of his bunk, face tucked out of sight. "Babe, you check its inventory right before we leave and pack the, the necessary," he mumbled.

"Toilet tissue, sir?"

"No! And nobody check it except Private." He snuggled into his pillow to commence a fake-sounding snore.

Out of respect, nobody sniggered at the atypical retreat. Private retired and patted the dildo which took his love's place by his side tonight. "Little Giant, rest well. You've got work to do soon," he whispered as the computer shut down their HQ. The Hello Kitty backpack hung on Miss Perky's right arm as she posed genially on his trophy fish. "You, too, Pussy."

IOIOIOIOIO
"You want to make a toast?" Kowalski asked.

Private crowed, "A toast to success!"

Ouch, Private, that stings, Skipper thought, but aloud he said, "As you wish. Kowalski, what are our options?"

Kowalski already had their HQ's revolving door set to 'bar' and pivoted it to the locked cabinet.
"How about Duff beers all around? Slight on the alcohol content because of your upcoming sw---"

"--- not for me! I'm a sopistirated bird, I am. A whiskey and soda, please. Make the soda a diet Coke." Private arched his body partway into a Quantum Hypercute as two of his teammates covered their eyes out of habit. Skipper didn't.

"That's not the way it works, babe."

"Wot?"

Rico tittered. "Sodakaboom."

"Wot?"

Kowalski seized this opportunity to teach. "Soda water is a mixer for drinks, Private. It's commonly called ---"

"Kaboombubbleeeeee."

"Er, yes, Rico, bubbly water. You can change flavors by switching tonic water for bubbly. You, Private, might begin with a simple Jack Daniels and branch water. Here, I'll mix it for you."

"Oh. Righto, then." Private accepted the tumbler. "Strong! Mmmm, I taste like a real grownup!" The drink shot to his head and he kissed Skipper hard, fast enough to take him off guard. "Ooops, I forgot we're on hia---"

"High alert? No, Private, this is a relaxing mission, er, vacation, for, um, relaxing. No alerting in any way, shape or form. Feels good, doesn't it?" Skipper sounded as if he were trying to convince himself.

Giddy as never before, Private bent his love into a dancer's dip and planted a big smack on his beak again. He did his best to sound sultry in an Aussie accent. "So it's fair dinkum to do this --- and this --- and streuth, this ---"

Skipper levered himself upright with a move that none of his team had ever seen. "Heh yeah a real grownup, yes indeed, by George Herbert Walker. Ooookay, that's enough."

"More! More!"

"By Grant's Special Blend, what have I created? No, you can't have more than one drink. That's an order."

"Partypooper."
"That's partypooper, sir, and yes, I am. Next question?"

Kowalski and Rico stepped in. "Here, Skipper, your Duff and let's toast to, um --- "

"Teamworkyahayyahayhahahah!"

They drank half a bottle each as Private watched them, glassy-eyed. "All right, it's zero hour plus fifteen, time to shove off. I'll carry the backpack for the first leg." Skipper donned the Hello Kitty accessory.

Private giggled. "It's got cherries on it! No cherries in this lair, no siree bob's your Uncle Nigel! I was the last one!"

Rico and Kowalski clamped flippers over Private's beak before he swam into obnoxious waters. "Private, you need to hit the Hudson and fast. A cold dunking will sober you up." The two shuffled the young penguin to the base of the ladder.

Private placed his flippers over his teammates' and acted as if he were playing the flute. "Do do dootle doode doo do Road Trip, do do dootle doode doo do Road Trip," he sang in a muffled fashion through their grip. The tune was the Circus Song from their adventures in Monte Carlo and Skipper groaned.

"If I never hear that song again, it'll be too soon. Men, stay frosty and we'll see you Monday. Our body doubles secure?"

Faux Skipper and Private's plushie awaited deployment near the portholes. "Aye, sir."

Private gathered himself for the trip with mental effort he wouldn't have owned before Åland. "Mmmhmm." His captors released their hold as they felt him relax. "Wow, wot a rush, like a sugar high from Winkies, um." He cleared his throat. "Ahem. Ready to go, Skippa?"

The prospect of high adventure intoxicated the commander better than any drink, plus it left no hangover. The gleam in his eyes told everything to his crew and they grew happy for him. "Sure, kid. Let's blow this popsicle stand."

The saying triggered an explosive reaction in Rico. His eyes flew wide as he became agitated. "BlowPollycite!"

Kowalski turned in surprise. "Polly who? Is this an old flame you've been holding back on telling me about, Rico? Er, not that you must. Dr. Phil says --- "

"PollyKABOOM!"

Kowalski flinched. "Thanks for that mental image of your intimacy with her, Rico. I'm sure she was very special to you --- "

"Kaboom. KABOOM. KABOOM!" The explosives expert took a deep breath. "Watr."

"Heh, you mean --- naturally I thought, well imagined, really --- well. Well, then. Yes, Skipper and Private, keep a water, I mean weather, eye out for pollucite. You'll have a chance of spotting it since you'll be underground and away from Manhattan's paved over, polluted, civilized ... mess."

Private answered because Skipper seemed already sightseeing on the road, his pupils blown to the size of aquamarine cabochns. "You mean the kaboomy rocky stuff lookin' like soan papdi?"
Mentions of candy brought Skipper back to earth. "Who's got soan papdi? Did someone make an after hours trip to Bailey's Snackatarium without telling me? That's AWOL behavior, whoever it was." But the glare lost its fire in a moment. "Shoot me a chunk and I'll take your case under advisement. Maybe we can bypass a formal inquiry."

"Sir, no soan papdi."

"Damn. Goodbye, then."

Kowalski quoted J.M. Barrie for once. He'd kept a few quotes in memory from a production of Peter Pan in a Central Park presentation a while back. "Never say goodbye because goodbye means going away and going away means forgetting."

"Kowalski, that's a little cosmic, even for you."

Kowalski tried another Barrie quote. "Second star to the right, straight on 'til morning."

"Huh? Come again, soldier?"

Why waste whimsy with this group? Doris would have understood. "Oh all right. Head up the Hudson 'til you come to the Mohawk, hang a left, swim on to Schoharie Creek and sharp left. Now you swim straight ahead on Schoharie Creek, don't get confused you're nearly there, keep going past Punchkill Creek before making your right onto Cobleskill Cr--- "

Kowalski just knew he'd be interrupted. "Punchkill Creek? I like the trip already, boyo!"

"Yes, I thought you would. Let's consider other named features so you may drool over them before I impart vital data, shall we? Tributaries you'll bypass include Fox Creek, Panther Creek --- "

"Oooh, yeah, that's what I'm talking about! Tough dudes, those panthers and foxes!"

"--- East Kill, West Kill --- "

Skipper halted his euphoric commentary. "What's with the killing? This is peaceful upstate New York, right?" He shot a protective look over his shoulder in Private's direction, but Private missed it because he busied himself adjusting the backpack's straps to the proper fit over toned muscles.

"Kill means creek in Dutch, sir."

"So Cobleskill Creek means Cobles Creek Creek?"

A lieutenant's job was never easy. "A linguistic blending puzzlement, to be sure, now moving right along --- "

"I don't like Dutch lingo as much as German."

"That will devastate King Willem-Alexander, his lovely family, and the entire Kingdom of the Netherlands. May I continue?"

"Punch it, Chewie!" Skipper chortled.

"Indeed. As I was saying, go past Punchkill Creek to stay in Cobleskill Creek. Howe Caverns will be on your right with an overland waddle of approximately one half mile. It's a new moon tonight so you'll rely on our inborn penguin vision and sense of direction to find north." Kowalski looked smug. "If that fails, find the Maglite that I reminded Private to pack. Use the smartphone GPS the way I showed you, swim against the current and you'll do fine. Toodles!"
"Yahtoodles!"

IOIOIOIOIO

"We're out of the Five Boroughs, Skippa! I feel ever so free!" Private paced his leader side by side.

Thirty minutes into their vacation, Skipper admitted a loosening of his neck tension as he stroked smoothly through the dark waters. "Yeah, I think I'm starting to, too. Hey, there's Yonkers."

As if pulled by a magnet, Private swam east from their midstream position towards the fabled Wally Winkie Candy factory. "Fancy a Fudgy Duckling, Skippa? A covert break-in operation with night maneuvers, just your sort of relaxation, eh?" He halted at a tug on his toe.

"Let's stay on mission, er, on point. I want to make thirty miles before we take a break. We left fifteen minutes later than scheduled, plus our slink on the sidewalk past Corpus Christi Church took longer than planned. The decorating committee for St. Patrick's Day was running in and out of the church like us penguins on a March. They must have been burning the midnight sacramental oil. I thought we'd never pass by undetected."

"Aye aye."

Skipper felt a gripe coming on and decided to air it before it could fester. "See those lights on in the waterfront buildings, and it's nearly three a.m.! Don't humans ever sleep?"

The city sported a blue cube shaped building of Kastelholm height. Rather than the castle's bulky uneven outline looming unlit in the gloom, this structure promised the ambiance of recent history adapted into a frivolous purpose. "Skippa, I've heard the Shakespeareans in the Park chatter about this place. It used to be a telly production buildin' and now it's a performin' arts center! Huzzah for plays!"

Skipper would rather forget the whole association with Shakespeare, Central Park and sleep deprivation paranoia on this pleasantly taxing swim.

"Well, Private, I'll sleep through Hamlet, if you don't mind." Skipper forged past the blue structure as Private trailed behind for a final quote from the Bard to compliment the view on a moonless night. One story of the cube glowed a beacon left turned on to the performing life, or perhaps a janitor plied his lonely trade in the dark hours.

“How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a weary world.” Private ought to have known that Skipper's honed commando hearing would discern the words above the gurgling of the Hudson.

"What was that?"

"Um, nothin', just poetry."

Skipper chuckled as he turned onto his back to look Private in the eye a yard behind him. "Thou swell, thou witty, thou sweet, thou grand. Wouldst kiss me pretty, wouldst hold my --- um, hand doesn't scan for us penguins, but you get my drift, right? A little Lorenz Hart lyrics from my heart."

A sob rose above the murmuring current. "Skippa, you made me cry."

"Shit! There's no crying in swimming! I didn't mean to --- "

Private coughed, sobbed and choked in watery gasps. "I --- I --- w-want you to --- "
Skipper dove under Private so that the Hello Kitty backpack buoyed him until he recovered. When the heaving died down to sniffles at the moment Skipper ran out of oxygen, he surfaced by the side of his love. His voice turned into a snarl because he couldn't bear to cry at the outset of their special time together. "Don't ever scare me like that again, you hear me? Personal presence persistence precedes poesy, you got that?"

"Ye-Yes. Aye."

It wasn't until they spied the new construction on the Tappan Zee Bridge that calmer moods prevailed. "Sorry, honey."

"Aw, forget it. Let's haul out for a breather since we're thirty miles out. This is the widest part of the Hudson." The two voyagers selected a piling on the south side of the bridge section due to be dismantled this year. The footing provided ample room to sprawl as they breathed lightly, considering their recent scare. Ten minutes passed before Private divined the fruitful ideas sprouting from his commander's think melon time.

"Did you notice how it was harder to keep afloat after we passed New Jersey's border with New York?"

"We passed New Jersey? Yay!"

Patiently, Skipper plied his patience. It came more easily since this was not, technically, a mission fraught with danger. The danger of drowning remained everpresent, though, and the Hudson deepened further north. He pushed to the back burner the realization that because Rico and Kowalski weren't along, he had fewer souls to protect and could relax faster. "Yes, Private, we did a few miles back. The salt line of the Hudson varies depending on snow melt runoff. There was hardly any snow this winter, but there was plenty of rain which pushes brackish water borders towards the salty sea." He saw that Private struggled to expand his worldview from his current surroundings to the big picture. The lesson was imminently important, so he explained rather than make Private work it out himself. "That means we're now swimming in fresh water. We must keep in mind that we could sink easier than a ruptured duck. Remember your lesson in Inuit throat singing to keep you alive longer, if it ever comes to that, Rockgut forbid."

Private added his bit to the observation of Mama Nature. "The Hudson up 'til now was just like K'walski mixin' my drink, yes I see, and now it's, it's pure branch water without the Jack Daniels, um, I mean the sea." He dove further into science before bringing up personalities, which was so like him that Skipper swallowed a lump in his throat. "I'll not float as well as I did swimmin' with Hunter back to Antarctica. Wot a fun road trip that was! I wonder wot Hunter is doin'?"

It would serve no purpose to remind Private that his friend, the tween leopard seal, outgrew non-penguin-munching tween time to dive into leopard seal teen time and all that went with it. Skipper found a way to divert the subject from what could depress Private. "Oh, by now she's likely dating boys and crunching calamari and, um, various yummies. In other words, Private, she's doing what comes naturally. Just like we are."

Private's sympathetic nature often prompted his worries for his friends. "I do hope she gets away from any ice worms. We saw wot they can do on the Åland telly, and the humans barely escaped with their skins. Poor Hunter wouldn't stand a chance."

Time to divert again. "Yeah, she was a good kid. Speaking of, did you realize that we passed one of the few good things in New Jersey, the old Fort Lee Movie Studios?"

The tactic worked. "Movies! I love movies! Wot sort of movies? Were there musicals and, and
comedies? How about musical comedies?"

Hoo boy. Skipper dug deep into what he usually sifted from his stash of intel. "Babe, this was before movies had sound, but Kowalski listed a bunch of slam bang titles that Phil read to him, like *Saved From The Titanic* --- Private made a distressed sound --- "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" --- Private whimpered softly --- "oh yeah, and *The Bluebird*, you know the one about finding the Bluebird of Happiness in your own back habitat." Skipper grew quiet after seeing Private's smile return.

"Anythin' wrong?"

"Sing Sing Prison on the east shore right over there" --- Skipper pointed --- "reminds me that we passed Gacy's cell at some point. I didn't pick it out when the Newark Northern State Animal Prison hove into view, or would have hoved if it weren't so dark tonight."

Private's voice took on solemnity. "He's safely behind bars. He'll never threaten you again, sir."

Skipper twitched at the 'sir.' "I don't want to think about him or even list him as a nemesis like Blowhole and Hans. If he'd gone through with his plans, or, or if he and his gang played The Game with me as the --- "

Private muffled the pained remembrance with a kiss. "It didn't happen. Manfredi and Johnson wouldn't have stood for it, all right?"

Skipper was in deeper memory than he generally allowed. "Two of them versus eight braaping gangbangers, I dunno, Private, what chance --- "

Another kiss. "Didn't happen, wouldn't have, couldn't have. Remember how K'walski, Rico and me joined in the battle? And that's that. He'll not swim under the sun again, ever. He and his bloody gang likely got treatment in prison and aren't even in gangs anymore."

"Young Private, you inspire me." Skipper kissed back at last. "I've missed this. New Jersey be damned, I like this." They breathed as one.

Private took Skipper's flipper. "Mmmm, well, New Jersey must get a few blinkin' things right, like the Bluebird movie. It's a sweet story, just a Lunacorns episode ahead of its time." He brought the flipper up for a kiss. A minute later, the two birds lay entwined as the Hudson burbled a love song to accompany their petting. Hurrying with the passion of youth into the point of their entire trip, Private skimmed Skipper out of the backpack and unfastened its closure to delve directly for the dildo. "I declare the hiatus over with --- "

A car honked in the distance. Skipper wiped his beak and sat up. He turned a laugh into a discreet cough before blocking the questing flipper. "Aw, Private. I don't want to start something here. Cool off, I'm impatient, too, but this isn't what I had in mind for us --- "

" --- let me make a more romantic atmosphere, I packed eight glow sticks they can be candles --- "

The commander commanded, but gently. "Babe. No. I'm not in the mood."

Private rolled away to face the piling, hugging himself as a sparse amount of cars droned east and west on the useful part of the new bridge. He panted. "But I'm horny!"

Skipper couldn't laugh at that aching statement without sounding callous, and he wasn't, really he wasn't. "I'm sorry. We'll have times like this --- "
"You've spoiled me, always bein' ready day and night, and now I --- I --- I --- oh oh no --- " The young penguin betrayed his years by choking out hurgh huh ooooh splprsh and then easing onto his back again with a sigh. "Well, that's finished me and I didn't even touch my willie. Let's head into the water again to rinse --- wot are you doin'?"

Skipper bent to clean his love. "You'd do the same for me. Hush and take five."

IOIOIOIOIO
"Moley, you look tired. Sit a while?"

Had he lost his overcoat and goggles somewhere? Frances had never seen him this disheveled or out of his basic outfit that stayed miraculously clean, given his living conditions. The muslin shirt and plain twill trousers shrouded his hunched shape while outlining shoulders the width of a lowland gorilla's. He waved a hand to dismiss her invitation.

"Frawnces waiting for trip, I can be ready --- "

"No, it's all right. I don't want my driver to fall asleep at the tiller. Sit. Have a deep fried morel. Here." She plopped one onto his lips and he munched.

"Mmm. Good cook. More morels?"

Twenty-four morels later, he relaxed enough to sit on her bed because there was no room for a chair. It creaked from his weight but held up. He must own muscles upon muscles, she thought, and then looked away. She played hostess, as Mom had taught. She sat beside him and handed him a drink of plain seltzer water.

"Twussnts? From where?"

"Fourth Street Food Co-op."

He belched from the water's bubbles. "This good, too. Frawnces, when we go?"

Frances made up her mind. "Tomorrow. We rest here tonight. Five hours more in a tunneler can't appeal to you at the moment, right?"

Had none of his harem or his mysterious dolphin friend ever shown consideration to him? His little eyes crinkled in puzzlement. He relaxed further into her memory foam and blinked two minutes straight before replying. "Yes. How you know?"

"I'm your drzhp, silly. You knew I felt bad about maybe leaving Mom's china hutch behind for Jeff to scrap into firewood and I know you're tired tonight. Honestly, Moley, you're something else, you know that?" She patted his knee and he winced.

"Sore knee? Too much pumping the pedals? The clutch in the Mrsdm turning stiff? What's the problem?" She had never driven the vehicle and could only guess at its gear mechanisms, even after
all these months. He likely had driven far for a rendezvous with his friend. He looked numb in the brain and in the bottom from too many miles traveled at one time.

His gaze remained hooded as he sidestepped her slur against his vehicle, even though she'd only wanted to know for practical repair purposes. Really, men of any stripe and their love of their personal machines made her roll her eyes. "Flpr turned crazy. Maybe I no visit him anymore." He played with the white hair at her temples contrasting with the sienna strands. She let him tuck the snowy lovelocks behind her ears.

"Oh, too bad. I imagine that kings don't have many friends, at that." She waited to hear the whole story before he passed out. He slumped further into the memory foam until he leaned back on his elbows. The shoes that resembled Red Wing work boots that she used to wear in the dirty Hoboken Zoo habitats showed crusty salt up over the laces. He'd tromped through swampland at some point. The New Jersey Dismal Swamp? That wasn't far, so why had it taken him a week over schedule to return? Not that she'd been keeping track for bookkeeping purposes. Their relationship was more comfortable than that.

He twisted his generous lips. "Frawnces not understand."

Oh, really? "Hold on, Moley, I'm human, t--- er, I've been there and done that. I've cut ties with friends deliberately and not so deliberately."

"Why?" He seemed wide awake when she'd thought him nearly down for the count.

She sighed. "There never seems to be a good enough reason when it's all over and done with, you know? I realized from the get-go that college friendships fall by the wayside after a few years, but when I lost my job as zookeeper, I lost networking friends and those who seemed friends even outside of work. When I moved from my apartment into the boarding house, that cinched it." It was silly to her at the time that she missed potlucks, dressy benefits, and schmoozing with Tri-State bureaucrats, but there it was. Santeria took the place of all such socializing.

"Life hard."

"You got that right."

He rubbed her palm. "No one stayed?"

"Not one. Then my mom passed, but, well, it's all right now that I met Godmother Felicity and my Godfamily so don't feel sorry for me --- "

"And Warriors." He clacked her nine copper bracelets before tracing their etched exteriors.
This was tricky to explain. "I need the Warriors and Oyá in my life, but yeah, there's no substitute for a hug from Felicity and her family, who are now my family."

"Flpr no hug me when we meet last week. He is ... different. I think he outgrew me."

Delicately, Frances asked, "Does that hurt?" Likely he'd tough it out like the impassive royalty she'd seen on TV, but he surprised her.

"It hurt. Whash can I say?"

He was back to diddling her lovelock, his broad hand brushing her ear. He was humming a tune she would never be able to, because his subsonic rumble rattled her chest, rose in pitch to tickle her ears and then shrieked into the range she couldn't hear. She could tell he was still vocalizing by the way his Adam's apple bobbed. Her scientific curiosity rose along with his Adam's apple and it seemed this was a good time to ask a question when he neared vulnerability in sleepiness.

"Did you travel to the ocean to visit your friend?"

"No, to round lake. Flpr swim upriver."

Round lake? She let this drop because she really wanted to know how rather than where. "Moley, how did you talk with a dolphin?"

The apple bobbed again and then she knew how in an epiphany before he spoke. "Like thish." Squeaks descended tonally and then rose to fade away, again and again. If she'd been back at Hoboken, the zoo contained spectrum analyzers to measure high frequencies and maybe she'd measure his to write a paper on it to get international recognition. Her voice turned excited.

"Sonar, dolphins use sonar and bats use radar, of course the communications are similar and you can speak to animals that way, you can, against all odds ... " She trailed off in deep thought. Did a small 14.7 percentage of bat exist in his genome? Now that is whackadoo science, Frances, she chided herself, but she couldn't stop speculating. Did he acquire the vocalizations when he ate bats? Stop! That's Lamarckian! Get hold of yourself, Frances! Besides, you don't know he eats bats.

A brain fart exploded from deep in her cerebral cortex and rose into her corpus callosum. Frances, what if he eats cave bugs for protein, like worms and scorpions and, I mean, morels taste divine yet one's body needs protein ---

His eyes widened. "Never thought of that." He shrugged when she disengaged his hand from her hair to place it on the coverlet between them. "Frawnces smart."

She glanced towards her airlock front door, where the orichas lived. If she resumed a completely
scientific mindset, she would change back into what got her into trouble: purity. No, she'd not exchange her friendship with him, her friendship with Felicity or the Santeria pipeline into the spiritual side of life for cold science. "Smart enough not to upset the applecart, my drzhp."

His head dropped back as he lay flat, his arms to his sides and feet still on the floor. "Okay, you rest here and I'll stretch out in the Mrsdm." He didn't reply as she unlaced his boots, their laces stiff with salty mud. "Oof, cooperate here, Moley. Point your toes."

"Mmmm, whash?" A firm tug and the boots came off to reveal dingy socks.

"Ugh, you can rinse these out to dry overnight." He snorted into a snore as he snuggled into her pillow. She grimaced. "Or I can do it for you. No, no, don't thank me. Big push, get these legs onto the bed, one two three lift, there you go."

Frances flung a corner of her coverlet atop Moley's bare feet. She held the socks in two pinching fingers as she marched eight steps to the sink in the tiny bathroom to soap the offending hosiery. A squeezing rinse in clear water and they were done. In the absence of a washer/dryer combo, this laundring method served well enough for dainties and there was always the 85th Laundromat Inc. five blocks away for her muumuus, caftans and such. She strung the sox over the mirror.

The Mrsdm showed signs of clinging mud and tupelo leaves stuck in the door hatch. Oh, so not the Dismal Swamp of New Jersey but the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina. Inside the swamp, Lake Drummond was naturally round and nobody knew why. It fit that a mysterious natural feature was venue to such an unusual meetup of alphas. She gripped the removable seat cushions and yanked. The two unfolded into a serviceable narrow bed when placed together and she lay down.

Lying on the floor of the Mrsdm, Frances let her mind play free as she settled in for sleep. Moley could be part bat, or he could be more than the not quite human that she'd concluded in the beginning of their relationship because a lot more than not quite human would explain some things, like his startling night vision, for instance. Hmmm, could this development change their friendship? She wanted him in her life as before. No, she'd not allow their mutual trust to degrade. She dreamed of Batman when she slept, a true Batman with leaf-shaped ears, a piercing cry and tiny eyes. Dream Batman was tall and slender like Val Kilmer and when he produced a blob of pollucite from his utility belt to throw at the Riddler, Frances jolted awake.

Thursday dawned as they departed for Howe Caverns and made good time getting there.

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Seventy-seven minutes after the Tappan Zee bridge, Skipper called for a break. He allowed the Hudson to float them south for five minutes. Private plunged his head into the chill waters in a bracing dip. "Um, Skippa, we're losin' ground, I mean water. It doesn't seem like your usual gungho-ness."
Skipper ignored the sally. "Follow me." His speed undiminished by the backpack's drag on his hydrodynamic shape, he swam into and out of sight underwater as Private took up caboose position. The two penguins hauled butt and when Skipper sounded, Private followed unhesitatingly. Down, down to the bottom of the Hudson they sped, feeling the difference between their saltwater pond in Central Park Zoo and the mighty river. Cloying fresh water plastered their feathers to their bodies, side currents tugged them this way and that and they touched bottom. Even their penguin vision strained to make out each other in the inky depths two hundred feet down to a gravelly bottom. Skipper put his flippers out and they hugged before swimming leisurely to the surface.

Once they breathed evenly again, Skipper asked a question. "Private, how did the dive go for you?"

"Swimmin'ly."

Skipper smacked his cheek. "You little pipsqueak, I mean are you noticing the difference between our habitat's pond, the Atlantic that you and Hunter messed around in all the way to Antarctica, and your Saturday night bath with your rubber duckies? Did you at least feel the tidal pull?"

Private turned over to look up at the stars. "Give me the backpack now, Skippa."

"Then will you answer?"

"I'll think about it."

"No insubordination, soldier, I don't care what we are to each other. We've arrived at our nation's military academy. This is important because the river is deepest here at West Point. By Putnam's periwig, let's show some military discipline." Skipper opted to switch out carrying the backpack after fifty-nine miles. He attuned the straps to Private's more compact form and yanked one hard enough to spin him. "Report."

The look Private gave in return was a measured and mature regard. He ticked off his impressions on his flipper, but since he only had one thing to tick, he had to go back to it with his other flipper again and again. "One, righto as you said, I feel fresh water draggin' me down. Two, the Atlantic makes me feel right at home since I was a baby in it, so to speak, and this river is new territory, sort of challengin', if you take my meanin'. Three, I saw a sturgeon off to our right. She looked old and tired and long as a Yugo."

Skipper blinked. "You did?"

"So you didn't?"

"No. Congratulations, Private, you glimpsed the biggest fish in the Hudson. No wonder you caught
your trophy fish when you were just a tween."

Private harrumphed. "That was an accident and you know it."

"Well, duh, the catching was since we all helped you to land it, but you spotted it first. Never downgrade yourself, babe. The world might, but you don't have to."

Seeing that Private needed time to chew on the words, Skipper porpoised as he made up the five minutes’ drift while he headed north again. He didn't look back. Private would follow eventually, as he grew used to the weight on his back. For the moment, it was enough to shed the burden of both the backpack and his beloved companion for a little me-time. With one third of the voyage completed, life was good and the March constellations agreed.

Ahah, there was the Lynx! Kowalski had spouted one of his tall tales about how the constellation was named for Lynceus, who sailed with Jason and the Argonuts, a batty group of Greeks. Lynceus had keen eyes and could even see things underground. No wonder Jason wanted him along on the mission to recover the Golden Fleet. Some imagination, that Kowalski. What were he and Rico doing now?

Private was only a little winded to show how he had raced to meet his love. "Say puffpuff Skippa, K'walski didn't mention any sharks in gasp the Hudson, did he?"

"Crap, no! Did you spot one?" Automatically, Skipper formed a perimeter as he protected Private's blind side. He craned his head this way and that.

"Mmmm, I was just wonderin'." The commander discarded his impression of Private as ninety-five percent mature and reduced it to seventy-three percent.

"Penguins never make it to the Endless Iceberg if they tell lies, Private." Skipper took off north again before Private could giggle.

IOIOIOIOIO
"Magnificent! Thrillin'! Gorgeous!"

"It's Cohoes Falls. We'll need to portage here where we leave the Hudson for the ever-lovin' Mohawk." Cover proved sparse because early spring meant short greenery as the underbrush only came up to their navels, if birds had any. Skipper kept a wary eye out for stray humans because you never knew who among the 16,000 souls inhabiting Cohoes might decide his Peekapoo needed a walk along the river. Personally, pine trees ranked low on his list of preferred trees and yet that was what he worked with today. He gestured to Private to snug closer to the pine trunk and wished for a good old larch with branches starting at ground level.

"Cohoes! Like the salmon! Yay!"

"Er, I guess. Kowalski knows about that stuff, I don't."

Private remained enraptured by the falls at full springtime volume. Skipper settled beside him and let the roar of the falls, the smell of pine trees and the nearness of his love carry him away. It did not matter that their estimated arrival at Howe Caverns stretched from 11 a.m. until about 4. This was a magical place.

After a timeless time, Private smirked. "Wot, not darin' to leap into the belly of the beast?"

"What? Are you daring me?"

"I am, I am. Instead of portagin' at the sides of the falls, we swim and rock hop like a rockhopper penguin comin' ashore at Cape Horny." Skipper wouldn't touch that sentence with a ten foot whacking pole, so he just rolled his eyes at Private.

"No zinger for me, then?"

"You've zinged your last zung, smartapple. Just tell me what you want to do."

Private pointed to the underlying rocks peeking through the spray in the middle of the cataract. The formation looked like a ramp. "See, we power porpoise to there, dive deep and then pop up onto the rocks, makin' our way to the top. We'll need to watch our footin', of course, but I think we can do it, wot say?"

Skipper calculated their combined strengths and shook his head. "Private, that sounds doable if we didn't tote the backpack. I'm thinking if only a spurt of water falling at great speed gets between your back and the pack, it'll push against the pack to overbalance you and you'll get squished against the bottom rocks when you fall. I'm going to nix this. Come on, I'll race you to the west shore and we'll climb where it's dry."

Private pursued his agenda. "Then you take Hello Kitty."

"What makes you think I can defy the law of gravity? Water hits the pack, I'm strapped into the pack, I faw down go boom just like any other penguin. Come on, I'm antsy to travel."

"But you always win out against everythin'! Sasquatches, army ants, that time with Gus --- "

Oh for gosh sakes. "Lady Luck plays a large part, and my team, and Dame Chance. I'm not invulnerable, Private."
"But you've got to be! I need you!"

"Not as much as you think." Skipper revised his notion of Private's maturity downward three points. He headed off, but Private crossed his flippers and stayed put. "I vote for my plan."

"Well, I vote for mine." Skipper turned back, flippers in the same position.

"It's a draw, even Steven."

"Looks like it, compadre."

Skipper plotzed. Private plotzed, too, in keeping with the mature level of debate. Oh, sure, Skipper could see he wanted his way, but he'd defend his reasons. Private tapped his beak. "We could still climb like a rockhopper in the falls if we toss the backpack ninety feet up to the rocks of the west side first oh, um, no, that would break the d-you know what."

Skipper allowed the discourse because it was best to, really, in a non-crisis sitch. Private did quite well so far. "Go on."

"We can leave the backpack behind in a hollow pine tree or somethin' and pick it up at our return. It'll mean roughin' it totally, no GPS, no food, just livin' off the land and water. Sounds like a right challenge!" Private knew which buttons of his love to push, Skipper would concede that point to him.

"Could work." Pause. "It means leaving the d-d-d-you know what I mean, behind because we can't risk getting it wet. Can you live with that?"

Private refused to wilt. "There are other ways to raise the, um, stakes in a relationship than usin' a dil" --- Skipper flinched --- "dilly of an invention to do it."

"And how did you learn of these ways, hmmm?"

Private scooted forward until his toes caressed his love's. "I kept my earholes open long before you and me became youandme."

"Then I didn't protect you well enough and that fail feels shitty." Skipper twisted his feet away from the touch. "You'll never know how shitty until you are totally responsible for another."

"Gloom and doom, are we? On my first ride-along, did you lose the plot when I turned up missin' and actually was out havin' a bang up spree?" Private smirked to the point of obnoxiousness. "All this time later, here I am safe and sound and we exchanged pebbles, for Petey's sake."

The falls roared as Skipper stared at the loved face and remembered Guatemala.

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Working backwards from the Trans-Dimensional Toothbrush and the Watch That Stops Time, Kowalski's first invention of any note he painted red and named the **Floribunda**. It debuted on Lake Atiltán in a lull of the undercover action when Private asked to go fishing. Since the youngest penguin did a ride-along in the tradition of all commando units, Skipper earnestly wanted to give the tween slack time to digest all he had learned thus far.

Of course, Manfredi and Johnson joshed the commander with the sauce of veterans unworried about living long enough to collect their pensions. They'd teased that Skipper coddled the boy, so they'd
been left behind in Panajachel along with Rico and Xochi, Rico's current flame. Skipper didn't quite believe Manfredi and Johnson when they said they planned to sightsee at the Maya Traditions Medicine Garden today. They had already enjoyed enough herbs on this mission.

Xochi and Rico would be doing what they had been doing every free hour since twenty-four hours after they met. Skipper mentally applauded their stamina when they appeared each morning, eager and fresh-eyed for the day. They were awfully cute together even at six a.m. reveille, sort of like Rico's stuffed bear playing Rico and the latest penguin Beanie Baby playing Xochi. Thinking about their size difference gave him a headache, so he didn't think about it much.

To give the youngest team member a chance to gawk at majestic volcanoes ringing the lake, Skipper and Kowalski had rowed to the middle of the watery expanse. Kowalski muttered something about 'test driving Floribunda under optimal 1,115.37 feet deep water conditions, no shallows for this baby'. The mission stalled with nothing they could do today to further its success, the sun shone brightly, and life was copacetic.

When Private's head broke water by the bow, Skipper swam to the present. He tilted his officer's cover back on his head so it wouldn't slip into the lake when he bent over the side.

"Skippa, oodles of fish down there! Come down for a looksee?"

Skipper smiled. "Your exploration, your first time sit rep, it's all your bag. Report when you've done enough eyeballing the Wonders of the Deep. Oh, and don't eat any of the fish. Kowalski's not yet done a water quality test."

Private's lower beak quivered. "But I need my fish! I'm a growin' penguin!"

Eh, Private could beg just like Rico, but Skipper held firm. "You heard me. Catch and release only."

Private upended after acing a by-the-reggs salute. Skipper glimpsed his black shape sound deeper and deeper and shook off the gollywobbles regarding the young bird's safety. He caught Kowalski's affectionate stroke of the enameled gloss of the motor housing out of the corner of his eye.

"Kowalski, we've not begun to set up your lab in Central Park HQ, so how did you upgrade this gizmo when we rented it only ninety minutes ago?" The current eddied around their becalmed vessel as they slewed towards the center of Lake Atitlán. Skipper assessed the streamlined outboard motor that looked like any other outboard motor.

Kowalski shipped his oar to lay it by his commander's on the bottom of the boat. "Sir, wait till we drift to the precise middle of the lake and I'll show you. The customized parts I added to this rental are ordinary things anyone has around the house: rocket fuel, C-4, five five inch lengths of zinc-coated platinum tubing --- "

"Five five inch lengths of --- how did you bring them out of the Ewe Ess of Ay? I ordered strict necessities only for baggage. Did you bully Rico into carrying them for you in his wonder gut?"

Kowalski bled science, when he wasn't kicking tail kung-fuing along with his team. "It was simple with my shrink ray. Did I mention I am working on a shrink ray?"

"No, you did not. Is it perfected?"

"Um, not quite. The C-4 gave me problems." After fiddling nervously with his dixie cup cap, Kowalski brightened. "I'm sure I know what I did wrong!"
"So that's why you've got a featherless left kneecap. I don't want to hear about a shrink ray until it's mission ready, soldier."

"Will do, sir. In the meantime, Private wants your attention." Skipper followed Kowalski's point to a squirming, laughing youngster bobbing near the stern, one flipper on the gunwale.

"What's so funny, Private?"

"Skippa, the minnows are nibblin' on my toes. It tickles." Private's face was open and happy as he giggled and Skipper memorized that expression for when his own nights blackened with dark memories.

Kowalski was so deep in science mode he forgot the effect of his words on an imaginative tween. "Not to worry about sharks being in this lake, but if you swam in Lake Nicaragua, boy howdy!"

"Sh-Sharks? In a lake? Are you sure none swim in Lake Atitlán?" Private looked like he couldn't bear to show fear on this, his first ride-along. He drew up his feet to stick them out of the water while his eyes grew round and a wave lapped over his chest. He placed both flippers on the gunwale as if to haul himself over the edge and back into the safety zone. "Really, really, really sure, K'walski?"

At a pointed look from his commander, Kowalski glommed onto his misstep. "Yes, one hundred and thirty point nine percent positive! No doubt! None whatsoever! Completely sure!"

"Private, we'll not let anything bad happen to you in Guatemala, Nicaragua or on the planet Venus. Rest easy in your mind and complete your sit rep."

"O-Okay." Private still looked spooked and then braved the depths with a fierce expression that stabbed any penguin's heart who had seen him mature from a seconds-old hatchling to now. Skipper shoved Kowalski hard and made their watercraft rock.

"Watch the mouth, bucko. He's young enough to believe every word you say."

"You know I can't resist over-explaining" --- Skipper gave him the stink eye --- "but I'll work on that, aye, sir."

"I expect a progress report when we get back to Central Park Zoo."

"Of course, sir. Uh, in the meantime, we've reached the middle of the lake. Check this out." Kowalski opened the top casing of the Evinrude with a triple tap and showmanlike flourish. A flick to right and left casings bared the interior. A device made of bright red tubing in pentagram form snuggled the motor proper and looked secured by Dubble Bubble chewing gum. It glowed even under the tropical noontime sun. Skipper could have sworn it strobed, too.

"What am I looking at?"

"The Floribunda is a cutting edge power converter. Isn't it sweet?" Kowalski patted it fondly. "I named it after the Star Wars power converter because it converts regular outboard motor power into hyperspace power via a positron linear activator composed of gneiss."

"I don't care how nice the activator is, we don't risk braving outer space with Private along, much less hyperspace." Skipper did a double take. "Hyperspace? Will we stay on Mama Earth when we activate it? You've watched that movie too many times, compadre."

"Only twenty-four times, sir, and yes. It'll seem like we fly, but we don't even though the boat may
skim like a flying fish over short distances.” Kowalski stroked his beak as he expanded on the
genesis of his precious thingamabob. "I considered constructing the device in ball screw form and
instead of using gneiss, using the less-compressed schist --- "

"Kowalski! Language! Private might hear!"

Kowalski joined Skipper as the commander peered over the starboard side of the boat. "Skipper,
Private could not possibly be corrupted by ball screw and schist because they're mechanical and
geologic terms respectively --- "

Skipper switched to squinting over the boat's port side. "Doesn't matter!"

There was a pppppt sound that Skipper ignored. "Yeah, see, he's still submerged and it's only been
eight and one third minutes, so lighten up. Pay attention to my accomplishment because it'll come in
handy for high speed escapes." Kowalski activated his admittedly poor sense of personal power
leverage. "We may need to escape with Private if danger arises, sheesh."

After a moment, Skipper came off high alert and straightened his spine. "Just, just watch it. It's his
first ride-along and all of us need to protect him, not only me."

Kowalski looked disgusted as he secured the motor casings once more. He snorted and then stared
at the gap between Volcán Tolimán and Volcán Atitlán. "My invention can aid chases, too, you
know."

Uh oh, Kowalski's sensitivity rivaled Private's sometimes. "Hmm, point taken. If Hans sticks to
swimming rather than cheating by flying and if uh, what's his name, that dolphin, help me out here,
Kowalski --- "

"Dr. Blowhole." Kowalski tightened his flippers over his chest and regarded Volcán San Pedro
miles away.

" --- yeah, Blowhole, that we slammed last year shows up again, we could scoot right after them.
Damn, we have a natural chance to overtake Hans in the water but Blowhole's twenty-five miles per
hour drowns us in his wake if he vamooses." Skipper removed his cover to rub its scrambled eggs
absently. "When and if you get your lab mojo, brainstorm construction of a sub or, or subskimmer."

It didn't take much to set Kowalski's mind humming as he stood down from his pout. "A
subskimmer for the four of us? By Yablonski's ideals, I've got a precedent, the Fantastic Four uses a
vehicle they call the Flying Bathtub, teehee, also known as the Fantasti-Car, I'll design similar
subskimmer blueprints --- "

"You know I don't sanction looking at comic books." Skipper replaced his cover and stepped firmly
into officer space. "Since we're focusing on your current gimcrack today, you can explain your
comic book knowledge at the same time you update that other issue's progress back at New York
HQ. Fair enough?"

Kowalski's voice was calm but Skipper knew better. "As you wish." Skipper jerked as he tried to
think where he'd heard that phrase before.

"Uh, all right. I, I do appreciate your brainpower on behalf of our team." Kowalski went back to
viewing the volcanoes as the pout resurfaced. "Really."

Kowalski's face worked as he appeared to wrestle with something as difficult as Hulk Hogan Atomic
Leg Dropping André The Giant. Oh crap, he wasn't going to go emo, was he? Not out here in the
middle of nowhere without a retreat for his commander except to jump overboard? Time for damage

Kowalski's feathers fluffed and he trembled as if he needed that extra bit of insulation from the cold, only this was the tropics. The only other time penguins did this was in abject agitation in the presence of something overwhelming, such as a leopard seal. Skipper could see it took an act of will to subdue the automatic reaction, whatever the hell caused it. "Th-Thanks, sir. I try."

"You're welcome okay let's get with the program --- hey, where's Private?" The two birds leaned shoulder to shoulder over far enough to unbalance the boat and slosh the gunwales. They peered into the lake but the waters weren't very clear. It was likely the towns surrounding the lake dumped effluence into it.

"It's been fifteen point two minutes, sir. Judging by my research into our body's capabilities and in my duly considered opinion, we need to --- "

" --- move out! I'll search portside, you take starboard!" Skipper and Kowalski dove in and began a circular search pattern automatically, spiraling like a two-pointed shuriken fifty feet apart, moving down the water column to a depth of fifty feet as they each scouted a semicircle. After their expert breath control ended eighteen minutes later, they surfaced for a gulp and then went back down. Another eighteen minutes later, they rose to catch their breath one hundred feet apart.

"It's impossible he --- not so young --- " Skipper forced himself to shout when his guts tried to crawl up into his lungs to squeeze his voice to nothing.

"Skipper, look!" Skipper spun in the water, not believing his eyes.

The two commandos heard a faint woohoo from a football field length away. The volcanos watched mutely as a large fish bucked out of the water with a small penguin clinging to its caudal fin.

"We're coming, Private! Hold on, kid!" Skipper bellowed as he took off, but Kowalski called him back.

"My invention can help! Come on, sir, this way!"

Faith in the scientist battled faith in his own swimming ability. Private's need for speed won out. "Okay, okay!" Without wasting more breath, the two shot for the boat and clambered aboard. "Go go go! We don't know what kind of fish it is, piranha or, or dorado I've heard they have ferocious tempers --- "

Rather than correcting his leader's options of fish not native to this area, Kowalski concentrated on starting the motor. "In neutral? Yes. Screw in water? Yes. Choke out? Yes. Arrow on motor grip at correct position? Yes. Go go go!" He pulled the cord taut per protocol and then gave the biggest yank he could summon.

Skipper would always remember the way the Evinrude gut punched him as it propelled him backwards.

Kowalski would always remember the shower of splinters as the enhanced outboard demolished the keel of their rental boat.

They would always share the memory of seeing Skipper's brand new cover and Kowalski's dixie cup cap fly off to parts unknown.
It took one second for the boat to become flotsam and two seconds for Kowalski's legs to splay against his leader's back in the position that his mama always said was indecorous. The outboard and Kowalski formed a Skipper sandwich as Skipper balanced their combined weight over the powerful motor. Since any outboard was designed to push rather than support weight, the Evinrude sank its propellers until Skipper and Kowalski dragged tail and feet into the water to slow progress.

"Asses up! Feet up!" Skipper roared. He hunched further over as his chest labored. "Ugh! Can't breathe!"

Kowalski leaned up, wavering as he allowed an inch for his commander's ribs to expand. For a moment, he feared overbalancing backwards which would queer the whole deal and then he righted the two of them into a stasis. With the hyperspace screws churning below the surface, the two progressed backwards towards Private's last known position.

Kowalski spread his longer body over the one beneath his, anchoring it to the motor with his longer flipper spread. An admiring cry broke from him in spite of everything. "Starts on a dime, doesn't it, sir?"

"Yeewhaw!" Private's voice strengthened as they drew near. "I'm havin' fun!"

"Where away is the private?" Skipper couldn't chance a look backward.

"Two points starboard!" Kowalski amended their trajectory after a moment. "Three points!"

Skipper slewed their joined weight to port in the dizzying way of navigation that was second nature to him. Their course corrected as water slopped up into his beak. He swallowed to rehydrate himself and then wished he hadn't. It tasted funky.

"Where away now?"

Kowalski cranked his head around. "Skipper, they're heading towards us!"

"Balaclava's Brigade! We can't hit Private! Kowalski, strip out the converter!"

"Aye!" Kowalski's chest squashed Skipper's head to the metal and he closed his eyes. He felt Kowalski's tug as the budding inventor thrust his left flipper into the slot between the two hinged housings.

"Can't! The water pressure from our momentum forces the casing tight! Skipper, help!"

It took all he had to move under Kowalski's imprisoning weight, but he slid his flipper into the slot an inch above Kowalski's and heaved. He broke a small bone in the appendage but would not notice it for two hours.

"Together, Kowalski! Uno dos tres!"

"Eins zwei drei!"

"One two three!"

At last the housing opened a crack. Kowalski squeezed in to jerk the Floribunda off the Dubble Bubble. At that moment, the gasoline combusted to fumes and then nothing. The housing pinched Kowalski's flipper as he extracted Floribunda and he dropped his invention inside the housing as Lake Atitlán claimed the Evinrude, too. He forgot about his work sliding downwards 1,115.37 feet as he joined Skipper in recon.
"Private! Sound off!" they shouted together.

The boy appeared cheerful enough twenty feet away. "Hey, guys, have a dekko at wot I caught!"
Skipper felt gratified that Private used the drownproofing technique he had taught him, relaxing in the water with energy-saving bobbing of the head only to sneak a breath when necessary. Private likely was as tuckered as the fish after a tussle close to an hour.

The fish waggled its tail as Private grasped its top fin. It appeared exhausted.

Now that the fish floundered in their sight, it looked beautiful in bright greenish gold scales with neon blue fins. Private clung to its long sail of a dorsal fin. "Private reportin', Skippa. I dove down to fifty whole feet under the boat and counted three hundred twelve fishes, from six inches all the way to two feet long basseses. I tasted the water and it was sort of swampy, so I spit it out. And just as I was finishin' my sit rep, whammo, this gorgeous beastie swam near and it was a right doddle to glom onto its fin." He hugged its tail section. "Up and down over the waves we went, woohoo!"

Skipper couldn't speak from relief. It took a full minute to absorb the happy ending to their day on the lake. Kowalski examined the fish without touching it.

"High forehead profile, bright colors, averaging fifty pounds, I'd say. Private, you've caught an oceanic bull dorado. How could it have gotten in this lake? Catch and release means release it near where an angler catches it. I don't understand. There's no outlet to Lake Atitlán to either the Atlantic or Pacific for it to swim up. Some human must have caught it and not wanted to eat it, the more fool he or she." He paddled nearer. "Uh oh."

The fish waved a weak fin in Private's embrace as its gills flapped twice. While the young penguin continued to hug the fish's body, its colors so bright they almost glowed faded rapidly. Starting with the head, hues leached from the green, gold and blue until all was a dappled olive green. The scales dulled along with the eyes. Kowalski and Skipper exchanged glances.

Private chirped, "I'll release it now. I'm eco-responsible, I am!" He gave it a final hug and let go.

Skipper nodded at Kowalski to explain as he dove to catch the dorado, his battle mind working at top speed. He caught the expired fish by one gill and hauled it topside.

"Private, the fish has died," he surfaced to hear. "It's not your fault. It would have been stressed by the fresh water sooner or later."

Skipper found his voice. "Kiddo, I saved it for you as a souvenir. You had a grand time, didn't you?"

There followed a silence as profound as any Skipper ever endured. Kowalski's shoulders slumped as Private didn't answer above a squeak. "I didn't mean to kill it."

"Your penguin brothers know you didn't."

"I didn't. I promise."

Dammit, that putrid taste of lake water must have affected his voice. Skipper cleared his throat after swallowing hard. Buck up, Leader Man, you can turn this around. "Come on, I'll ask Rico to store it in his usual way and when we get back" --- he expounded on what had hit him underwater --- "he'll taxidermify it. You'll be the first to hang art on our HQ wall, what do you say?"

Kowalski appeared to read more Private-speak than Skipper did this time. "You don't need to answer right away. Wait until we reach shore and tell us what you think, okay, buddy? Your first
ride-along, your first sit rep, your decision."

Private nodded soberly. "A-All right." He stretched out his flippers to Kowalski. "I'm tired."

Without further words, Kowalski held Private in a grip that wasn't quite a cuddle as he headed them both ashore. Skipper towed the fish and forty-five minutes later, Private gave his answer.

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"So you embraced the suck and our HQ has splendid art as camouflage for our tunnel Number One." Memory fled back to where it belonged as Skipper completed the tale. "Now you know my side."

"Skippa."

"That's my name, don't get it dirty."

Private took Skipper's flipper. "It's a favorite memory and now it's all different, honey."

"I suppose it is. We have the fish as memento."

Private rubbed the bone that was broken. "I don't remember wot Manfredi and Johnson did that day."

Noon church bells rang out over Cohoes and Skipper made a wry face at the pair's memory as if wherever they were now, they could see it. "They went to church, believe it or not, the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi from the damn sixteenth century. I don't know why they kept it secret until we all got together that night for supper."

Private looked wise. "You had to force it out of them, righto, now it's ringin' a bell for me." The twelfth Cohoes bell tolled. "Teehee."

"Oh hell that was it. Aw, those crazy knuckleheads --- "

" --- are with us in spirit, Skippa."

"Um."

Private stretched his legs and rolled his shoulders.

"Maybe I don't need the fish as a souvenir anymore. I mean --- "

"I'd like to keep it and hey, it serves a purpose."

Rude noises didn't come as naturally to Private as they did to Rico. "Pbbblbbbl. Miss Perky's bum can jolly well get used to another seat."

It was always personalities with Private. "I mean as camouflage."

"Oh. Then I'll readjust my attitude." He dropped his love's flipper and passed his own three times over his forehead as Sasquatch used to do when sparking a mental confab with her friend, Hugo. "There. Done."

Skipper had to laugh. "Oh you. I'll take the backpack for the next leg. Saddle up."

One more thing needed saying. "Skippa, you were wrong when you said I never was totally
responsible for someone. I was responsible for keepin' Eggy away from danger."

"The danger that was me and Rico and Kowalski teaching him to be a commando, I suppose."

"Yes. He was little and had nobody else to protect him --- oh. Oh. I see now."

"Good."

Private followed Skipper and when they portaged next to Cohoes Falls to head west on the south shore of the Mohawk, Private wrung another laugh as he shaped his top feathers into a Rico-style mohawk. It got flattened when they dove into the Mohawk to continue their journey.

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Chapter 37

Rico and Kowalski held flippers as their breath returned to normal. Kowalski sighed. Early Thursday mornings had never been so good. No arising at first light for calisthenics, no bolting down a smelt or two prior to performing and the lemurs would not boombox for hours yet. "Wonderful, Rico, that was wonderful. I don’t have any other words for it."

"Yah, purtygud." The silence lingered until Rico wanted uncharacteristic pillow talk. "Kwoskii."

"Mmhm, love?"

It all came out at once. "DyoumissDorispurtyparts?"

"Oh. Well, no. I haven't thought about any part of her in seven point four nine months and thank you for that." He dropped a kiss on the visible edge of the scar. "Do you miss Xochi's, um, pretty parts?"

"Sumtimez."

It was easier than he'd thought to be magnanimous. "She was a special penguin. I thought so from the beginning."

"Dancedgud."

"Not like you, you mean."

"Nope."

Kowalski gasped in an exaggerated fashion. "Blunt is your middle name, my friend. She had ballerina training."

"Uh huh." Rico shifted position and traced something in the air between them. Kowalski squinted through the lair's still present night lighting. In the pinkish tinged atmosphere, the gestures resembled nothing that Kowalski could imagine.

"What are you drawing?"

"Tutu. Wearonefr ime?"

"What?"

"Notmao. Laterz. MuchlaterzlikefrKidsmas?"

"I will wear one if you will, Rico." Kowalski hadn't anticipated this. He refused to be a substitute lover for Xochi. What they had going on would only be okay if things were equal between them because Dr. Phil said that equality worked best. Sometimes Kowalski wondered which algorithm that Dr. Phil used to determine equality in a couple, but then he discarded such blasphemy because Dr. Phil was, well, Dr. Phil.

It took a while for Rico to answer.

"Sure! Yah! 'NissPerky, too."

Kowalski rubbed his beak. "I don't want to think about where this is heading, Rico. You might have found the border to my comfort zone."
"Dunworry, Kwoskii. Justfrfun."

As Rico drifted away to sleep before they absolutely must arise at nine for Alice's flung breakfast of whatever the zoo budget could afford, Kowalski wasn't so sure he trusted Rico's last words.

The workday passed peacefully with the average amount of guests and the average amount of penguin hijinks performed for the crowds. At ice hockey time that evening, Kowalski settled on Rico's lap to watch the boob tube. Since there was only the two of them until Monday, they turned their tabletop vertical to serve as backboard to a sturdy easy chair using their table's cinderblocks for sides. After his rump grew uncomfortable, Rico horked up a ginormous natural fibers pillow with a gaily embroidered sea anemone on its top that cushioned his bottom cheeks.

"Not Rangerspooh."

"Scooter Alvarez says they'll play on Sunday. In the meantime, rooting for the Pittsburgh Penguins fills the gap, I mean, they do have the perfect name plus they won the Stanley Cup last year. If they win two consecutive years, they'll make history right up there with the Detroit Red Wings. Exciting, huh?"

"Yahguesso." Kowalski relaxed against Rico's front and grew cosmic.

"It'll be one year tomorrow since we defeated Blowhole on Åland. So much has happened since then, don't you think?"

Rico said nothing but squeezed Kowalski's flipper.

"Yes, I agree. We all took large steps in the personal development department."

Rico smiled.

"Is it wise to wait until St. Patrick's Day to put out Faux Skipper and Plushie Private for viewing or should we practice tomorrow with them?" Kowalski twiddled a feather in Rico's topknot.

Rico shrugged.

"You're right, we'd better practice tomorrow. Alice may act a little different these days, but she's nobody I want to tangle with without a full team backup. Come to think of it, she hasn't trod the landing board to inspect our island firsthand in quite some time. Why would that be? Any options?"

Rico shrugged again.

"That's true. Let sleeping dogs lie, oh you always come up with the perfect thing to say." Kowalski traced Rico's scar to its unseen puckered end under the white feathers. "You know, Rico, their vacation is ours, too."


Kowalski arched his flipper into a spiky pointer to caress his lover's face. "Does this ever bother you?" He knew the track of the scar by heart and he ran the touch from the corner of the winsome beak to smooth the feathers nearer the black pit of Rico's left flipper that could do ever so sexy things.
Rico twitched. He leaned around Kowalski to see the TV. "Nope. Game on, Kwoskii."

The desired end was worth deliberately not taking the hint to leave his partner alone. "Oh, Riiiicoooooo ..."

Rico slapped away the tickle that slithered into his pit. "Kwoskii, knockitoffnao."

Kowalski snatched the root beer and danced away with it. He swayed the brown bottle back and forth. "Make me."

Rico shrugged a third time and went back to watching the game.

"Aren't I more important than a silly game?" Kowalski pouted. He set the bottle on the floor before getting out his abacus. "We've spent 53.7% of today's waking hours since dawn watching TV when we weren't entertaining guests. For Laura Ingalls' sake, I want to do something different."

The abacus went flying as Rico tackled Kowalski to the cement. He plunged his tongue into Kowalski's beak to lick it open and kissed him thoroughly as he kept one eye on the TV. Thirty seconds later he was back to watching the game in a vegetative sprawl atop his cushion.

Flat on his back, Kowalski addressed the ceiling spikes. "That's all I'm getting? That's it?" He glossed over the fact that he'd kissed more in the last eleven months than ever before in his life.

Rico grunted.

"Yeah I know you said this is an important pre-playoff game but aw come on --- "

Rico leaned down to knock Kowalski's knees together. "Laterz. Gamenao."

Kowalski choked off a grunt of his own. He would not allow this to work its way into a quarrel. Dr. Phil said the biggest risk of all is admitting that what you have is not what you want. He parsed the past ten minutes scientifically. He wanted Rico's undivided attention, ergo, he was jealous of either the Philadelphia Flyers or the Pittsburgh Penguins. If he and Rico had attended the game, there would be humans to avoid and delicious popcorn to nibble. If everyone were where they usually were, there would be Private and Skipper and maybe Marlene to chat with because they knew more about hockey rules than he did. Hmmm, Private and Skipper. Were they this moment beholding crystal stalactites as they wandered gaily amid gravity-defying stalagmites? The ceiling spikes in the lair held no clue.

So, Dr. Phil, mused Kowalski, I do have what I want. I started a relationship with my friend and teammate Rico, who makes me happy. He and Doris are worlds apart in technique --- uh, Dr. Phil, you won't tell Dr. Oz about this, I trust --- but alike in responsiveness to what I do. He thought harder. I am happy in general, but I need to wait for a while to get some. Ergo, I can and will wait for what I want because it's important to both of us. "Rico, popcorn, please."

Rico produced popcorn. "Gotchabddy."

"What's this play called again?"

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The Flyers shut out the Penguins as both viewers squealed and groaned throughout the plays, alternatively bemoaning and applauding the Penguins' efforts. An ad for the Half Marathon urged all contestants to take their vitamins, say their prayers, and get plenty of rest for Sunday's run. An announcement from Channel One startled both birds.
Chuck Charles had never appeared more like an elder statesman. "The Goodyear Blimp came, saw and conquered The Big Apple. Witness its grace as it circles our fair city." A time lapse clip displayed the Wingfoot One rotating in its travels, slowly navigating to concentrate its presence near elementary schools. A play yard on location Channel One shoot captured in fast forward mode the children's delight as the looming aircraft tickled their fancies or their funny bones. "Only valued newscasters and public servants receive rides in the cabin to honor their contributions to the general welfare. Channel One reports that yours truly" --- Chuck winked toward the red eye of the camera --- "and two lucky people selected from among our city's staff will ride on St. Patrick's Day to cover the history-making parade." He straightened his tie as Bonnie Chang took over.

Bonnie's hair didn't move when she nodded firmly. Kowalski posited that industrial strength Aqua Net lacquered the glossy black waves. "Chuck shall newscast from the cabin and his compatriots, Alice Nelson and Filomena Irizarry, shall contribute comments as they cruise above the route. Ms. Nelson is head zookeeper at Central Park Zoo and Ms. Irizarry is a member of New York's Finest who is often on horse patrol."

Two jaws dropped. "Alice gets to do this thing, this marvelous thing? Whose palm did she grease? Midas' millions, she can't be rich like the Vesuvius family."

Rico was succinct. "Shudbepengwings."

"Why do bad guys get all the good stuff? I mean, Alice isn't actually bad, but, but --- "

"Shezapain."

Kowalski would not be comforted until Rico took up their interrupted kiss and completed what Kowalski wanted in the way that Kowalski wanted it. At his partner's direction, Rico turned Faux Skipper's and Plushie Private's faces towards the portholes when he began.

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Security protocols bolstered Kowalski's sense of scientific order, and he and Rico patrolled from dawn until 11 a.m. on Saturday the 17th of March. St. Patrick's Day meant a lot to the Big Apple, too, what with upped amount of visitors to the city and general bonhomie. Inside the zoo, bonanimauxie prevailed except for an area that ought to be peace personified: the Children's Zoo.

Oh, there had been a discontent ripple or three from the spider monkeys' habitat near the children's zoo nursery a few weeks back. Monkeys flung poo from the trapezes strung from the top of the total enclosure cage, but the turds only splattered the community's tree. Kowalski put down the spider monkeys' incontinence to general excitement over the upcoming St. Patrick's Day Parade and pooh-poohed the notion that the nimble monkeys actually could escape.

Efforts to speak with them were more of a strain than communicating with the chameleons, because the chameleons displayed a genial personality despite their lack of common animal speech. Spider monkeys not only would scream what everyone took to be bad Brazilian Portuguese words at you, but they reached skinny arms through the gaps in their cage to pinch the unwary. In particular, their hateful natures despised the color red, which Alice discovered when one snatched a hank of her hair out of its bun. They must have taken a leaf from ABBA's book and learned *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* phonetically to sing it in the Thanksgiving talent show.

Kowalski waxed philosophical as he pursued his duty in checking out the nasty simian newcomers, five months' residents yet still defiantly unsocial with outsiders of their troupe. They didn't seem to get along well with insiders of their troupe either, with no leader to settle disputes. Kowalski remained glad he was a penguin in a rookery.

*Skipper, my training as your second holds true as ever. I hope you and Private claim your full measure of happiness, however you do it. Rico and I will carry on in the traces. "We're lucky the spider monkeys plan chaos but never deliver, right, Rico?" he murmured, softly enough to evade perception by the monkeys who had gathered at the rim of their cage to scope out the penguins. He suspected they understood American even if they refused to speak it.

Rico cocked his head at the monkeys, who mimicked his stance. He growled, "Kwoskii, howyuknow?" while schooling his face to suggest vigilance, the way Penny did. Staring contests he could ace like nobody's business and it seemed the monkeys could, too.

After three unproductive minutes of staring during which Kowalski muttered *well it just seems in their nature to jabber and dither but not deliver*, the penguins moved along to marginally more communicative Children's Zoomanity.

Kowalski zeroed in on the most troublesome ungulate residents of the broad meadow to expend time and energy in the most efficient way possible. Once this group was out of the way, they'd progress to chatting up the bunnies and Randy. That chore done, they'd peek into the nursery to double check the zoo's infants and then it was onto a vantage point to watch the parade for a bit of fun. Faux Skipper and Plushie Private stood in place at their habitat while Rico and Kowalski patrolled, lounging like lounge lizards around the empty food bowl. It had been Rico's idea to anchor Faux Skipper in the mild breeze by draping Plushie Private over his violently orange feet.

After an assessment of Nannygoat's brood who nursed full teats on a complacent Nannygoat, Kowalski steeled himself to interview one of her kindred who would offer guff rather than a companionable nod as she had. "So, Chark, how goes it?"
Stay noncommittal, said Dr. Phil, and remember that questions are like attacks to some touchy folks, so keep them few and far between. Kowalski plastered a neutral look on his pan and elbowed Rico, who did the same.

The dwarf fainting goat looked left and right to his two pot-bellied hangers on to exchange smirks and then opened his mouth to reply from a sneering dark gray face. Suddenly the sneer became a sickly grimace. "Wh-What's that? I've never seen such a sc-scary --- " he choked out and swayed on his feet as he goggled over their shoulders.

Kowalski and Rico spun to follow his line of sight. Rico guffawed before Kowalski elbowed him again. "That's the Goodyear Blimp! We get to witness its first visit in years from Akron, Ohio to En Why Cee. I promised Skipper and Private that we'd videocam it because they're away right now, um never mind." Don't talk too much about your personal life, get down to business like I would, fix any problem and then move on to the next animal, Skipper would say.

Chark regained his customary attitude with a toss of his head and a stamped hoof. "Big deal. What's it to us?"

Kowalski put his own spin on his command training as he prepared to plant a seed of scientific wonder. It couldn't hurt to try. "This Goodyear Blimp edition started flying like a big, um, big --- " Rico mimed smoking a Habanero 87 Churchill cigar --- "cigar in 2014 with a top airspeed of 73 miles per hour powered by three vectored engines at 200 horsepower each. Isn't that amazing?"

Rude noises were the goats' specialty. "I say again, so what? Can we animals ride it?" Kowalski considered Randy The Sheep, who meandered some yards away. Why couldn't these caprines learn from Randy? Randy parlayed his borderline obnoxious personality into bare tolerance of his fellow animals and the human guests. It took effort on Randy's part to do even this much pursuing a worthwhile motto: Life isn't *that* bad in a petting zoo, so make the most of it.

Kowalski supposed a mammal lacking certain important boy bits like Chark and his pals already had a mad on against the whole world, so obnoxiousness was a coping mechanism. He'd need to consult Dr. Phil's sayings later. The esteemed doctor's *Don't make me put your head in my blender* sounded a tad extreme. He kept his head up as he answered the provoking question honestly.

"Um, not without stealth mode, no."

"Can goats eat it? We eat about anything." Chark began to chew his cud to demonstrate. The other two goats followed suit and the whole goaty atmosphere calmed, which was encouraging.

Kowalski watered the seed of wonder diligently. "Its skin is strong and fatigue resistant Tedlar polymer covering a length of 246.4 feet with a maximum envelope width of 46.45 feet and overall height of 57.57 feet, surely no goat could consume that square footage of --- "

"We'd give it a try, bird."

A sunshine metaphor, perhaps? "Look at it this way, a blimp gets you to admire the sky instead of always looking at the ground searching for your next meal. Don't goats need inspiration?"

"We're very self reliant." So it was down to a battle of wills, but Kowalski wasn't ready to come out of the clouds.

"A blimp generates dreams of travel?" The clouds turned to wispy stratus formations.

"Yah yah!" Rico joined in.
"Nah, once you've seen old Rocky Top, Tennessee, you're set for life in sightseeing. Am I right, boys?" Three beards waggled in perfect herd agreement. "I'm right."

Kowalski's psyche landed on earth with a thump. "Life is more than travel or eating. Last October's Blessing of the Animals procession brought up every one of our spirits in church, so this year maybe you three can join it."

Rico took a leaf from Kowalski's status as second, someone able to rein in Skipper's wildest paranoia or at least to channel it productively. Now he must himself stand in as a, er, stand in for Kowalski's role because his love was losing ground in the debate. Rico massaged his throat to communicate in the clearest fashion he could muster. "Aminalsbliesfiekwhoa."

Kowalski took it from there. "What my compatriot wants to get across, Chark, is that October 4th is the day we animals receive blessings from Padre Alfonso or whoever presides next time --- "

Chark stopped chewing his cud. "You mean to stand there and tell me that animals can parade in a church?"

Kowalski shrugged. "Sure, what's your point?"

"We weren't here in this zoo in time for it. I resent that." Kowalski exchanged an exasperated look with Rico. There was no placating an animal with this size grudge against the world.

Rico had had enough. "Tuffitout." The security patrol proved bothersome to his peace of mind, and he missed Skipper's attitude in Kowalski. He himself loved the bird, but he was not blind to him. Kowalski was a beta personality, lover more than fighter, although on occasion his gut instinctively prompted him to get down and dirty. Rico wanted to move along from the fractious goats' paddock to save his own serenity. "C'monKwoskkii."

Kowalski's brain bogged down in Chark's rhetoric. "Resent it, why? Nobody can go back in time to --- " he caught himself upon remembering his Chronotron --- "comparatively few animals can travel in time --- "

Chark bobbed his goateed head with its bobbed horns. He looked far from fainting as his fellows formed a wedge with lowered skulls. The bosses where goat horns normally sprouted from still acted as thick battering rams. "Goats like us wethers don't get any breaks. That ends here." Chark looked to left and right to receive support and got it.

Kowalski tried a Dr. Phil quote to maintain peace. "Anger is nothing more than an outward expression of hurt, fear, and frustration. How will anything you do today change the past? Wait until October and I'm sure the good Padre will --- "

Chark took it the wrong way, or maybe introspection simply wasn't his thing. "What are you bleating about? Anger is anger! We've got the right not to be passed over! We shall and will crash the St. Patrick's Day Parade in protest!" He took a breath to calm down. "Boys, keep it real, keep it cool. We don't want to faint."

Kowalski slapped himself in a Skipperly fashion to generate options. It didn't work.

The goats nodded to each other as they breathed in through the nose and out through the mouth for one minute. Then they set out at a trot which became a gallop towards the children's zoo entrance gate and then veered towards the spider monkeys.

"Hey, what are you doing?" hollered Kowalski. The breeze picked up, bringing blaring trumpets and tinkling glockenspiels of marching bands to their earholes. There came a whinny from New York's
Finest mounted patrol as the parade commenced. Most attendees lined the sidewalk just outside the main zoo walls to watch the spectacle. A few, however, visited the zoo for a quieter Saturday excursion.

Fluffer, Nutter and William twitched noses with pleasure as kiddies patted their glossy white bunny fur.

Parents remained on alert as parents always do.

"Kwoskii, deywíld!"

Randy The Sheep looked their way. He had enjoyed gentler treatment than usual by sticky kiddie hands this morning and now his good mood shattered as the goats stampeded past. "What's with you three? Criminey, first the spider monkeys act loofy and now goats?"

Fluffer, Nutter, and William sat up on their hind legs to spy the excitement without joining in it. "Watch out, they awe cwwashing fwww!"

Parents grabbed their kids to shove them behind their own bodies, ever vigilant to protect. Kowalski catalogued Urdu and Quebecois in the tumult of human warnings but understanding English remained his default as one parent bellowed in a makeshift public address system. "Gangway, people! These goats are headed for trouble! Grab your kids, not goat kids your own kids oh you know what I mean!"

How had Dr. Phil's advice led to this? Kowalski floundered with an anguished, "Aw no, the parade will be ruined!"

Rico gabbled in his native Hamarskaftet Nunatak before his English filter kicked in. "Kwoskii opshunz!"

Blurry options refused to focus on Kowalski's mental clipboard. "I'm barren as the Ross Ice Shelf! Follow them! It's the least we can do for damage control!" Hooves clattered through the zoo to the spider monkey habitat across the brick courtyard, bypassing the nursery.

Now, penguin commandos noticed Burt's gossip about a St. Patrick’s Day uprising from the spider monkeys yet paid it no serious mind. The creatures maintained a reputation for enraged screams with no real effect except annoyance, and Burt often heard the gist of a story wrong despite his huge ears. Today was to be different; today the monkeys had allies. Kowalski and Rico power slid after the three goats, one to each side of the wedge formation.

Chark and his pals zeroed in on the monkey cage in riotous mode. "Rocky Top will always be home sweet home to meeeeee --- " sang Chark along with his fellows.

"Rico! They're colluding with the spider monkeys, I see it all now! However did they communicate with the little twerps? Slide underneath the one on starboard and I'll take port!" Kowalski put the pedal to the metal. "We'll trip them into the middle one!"

The goats burst into the home stretch for the cage. Kowalski and Rico gave it all they had, yet the prospect of chaos fueled energy for goaty muscles and the plan to trip the quadrupeds fell short. Chark kicked backwards and missed Rico's jaw narrowly. If the kick had connected, the team’s explosives expert may have never spewed again. Kowalski rethought his options, which dotted his mental clipboard like dashboard lights now that adrenaline surged to clear his mind. "Rico, stop!"

Kowalski and Rico halted directly behind the goats for a last minute consult. Rico's grin was wicked. "Kaboom?"
"I wish we could. I wish we could." Part of Kowalski's mind dissociated from the sitch to observe the monkeys drawing away from the part of their fence nearest the goats. It was as if they communicated in Secret Evil Code with the goats, based on what happened next.

The victory evading their pursuers spurred Chark to sing with a chorus of spider monkey language that no zooster understood. "Now I've had years of cramped up city life, trapped like a duck in a pen," he baaaahed as he threw an obnoxious look in the penguins' direction. "Now all I know is it's a pity life, can't be simple again. Rocky Top, you'll always be, home sweet ho-ome to me, good old Rocky Top, Rocky Top Tennessee. Tennessee Vols, charge!"

Three heads butted, the chain link gave up its weakest link and spider monkeys spilled through the gap. "Climb aboard!" exulted Chark. A cluster of simians scrabbled to ride like Mike Smith on the goats while gesticulating to their fellows who ran alongside on all fours.

Next, the Children's Zoo entrance gate stood in the way of anarchic freedom. Kowalski fought against the impression that the monkeys and goats were as mindless as the army ants that the team escaped in Guatemala. Despite his inability to understand their motives, any animal above the rank of fish deserved consideration and even protection against themselves. For his own sanity, he had to believe this.

Chark and Company bounced off the gate, shook their heads for a retry and charged again in a surgical strike at the latch. The beleaguered unlocked gate slammed open and animals gained the park lawn at large, animals without the disciplined freedom that penguin commandos enjoyed. The goats clattered across a closed-off 66th Street to head towards a throng of people strung between the Carousel and the Heckscher Playground.

The penguin commandos slowed pursuit as they trickled through the gate to survey the greensward in a discouraged slump. After a moment, Rico galvanized into nonproductive action as his spirit swamped with emotions. He pinwheeled his flippers while Kowalski tapped his temple and furrowed his brow. The goats and monkeys appeared delirious as they headed into the crowd and not towards the noisy parade to the east on Fifth Avenue. What was wrong with Chark? Did he fear the concentration of New York's Finest in the parade who would squash his protest like a bug's? Fewer police guarded the playground than normal because the multitude on the sidewalks commanded their attention more. Did he actually wish to hurt humans and their young? Had Chark gone as bananas as the monkeys?

The scientist framed the scene before him like Antonioni, going from portrait to landscape and back again. He seized his love's shoulders to point him towards the vista of galloping goats and raving mad monkeys, riding three to a goat. The rest of the monkeys, fifteen strong, skittered alongside their fellows, shrieking. Onlookers scattered out of the way while mothers grasped toddlers' hands and shrieked a little themselves as they hustled their charges to safety.

"Rico! Do you trust me?"

Rico had a ways to go to get rid of excess energy. He flapped his flippers over his head while jumping like on a pogo stick. Finally, he burped out, "Yahcourse!"

"Do you have what it takes to halt these runaways before they disperse to butt into the crowd, specifically a net large enough to snare them and a rocket to carry it?"

Rico's face blanked as he thought. He nodded and rubbed his belly. "Yah! Gopher ittttt!"

"By Hawks' hambone, we can do this! Fire when ready!"
Rico stamped his feet, sighted the target of three goats and swarming spider monkeys, tilted his head back and roared, "Kaboom!"

He inhaled two cubic feet of air and closed his eyes.

"No, wait!" Kowalski framed the rapidly retreating group of animals once more. They neared the crowd of people, some of whom were mellow earlier in the day than usual, it being St. Patrick's Day and all. He could hear cries of "What the --- I'll never drink green beer again!" and "Look out!" and "We got monkeys riding goats, no frackalackin' way!" along with new profanities that he added to his glossary.

"Whutyadoon! Deygettinway!" Rico danced in place.

Kowalski cocked his head, operating his abacus. "Air currents, humidity, speed, vector, net weight, cumulostratus clouds --- Rico, face the opposite direction!" He turned his partner until the broad back was to the action, an unnatural pose for a commando penguin.

"Whaaaaaa?

"Yes! It's the only logical vector!" He bent down to his love's height. "Trust me if you've never trusted me before."

It took only one nanosecond to make up the explosives expert's mind. "Cowabungahhh!" Rico bellowed and then through strained jaws, the wonder tummy belched forth a rocket trailing a thirty foot square net, compressed and slimy.

The rocket began at a forty-five degree angle per Rico's stance, and as the weight of the net affected its trajectory, it headed straight up. At the zenith of its climb, Kowalski covered his face.

Rico watched open-beaked as the rocket flamed until it veered into a forty-five degree angle headed the opposite way than its initial trajectory, directly towards the galloping goats. He shook Kowalski's shoulder.

"Workinliekwhoa!"

Kowalski shrugged him off. "I can't look!"

Rico manhandled him to face his victory and pinned Kowalski's trembling flippers to his sides. "Yagotta!"

Kowalski's voice rose in pitch to its screechiest. "You're right, it, it's working like, like, like --- "

"Whoa." The rocket plunged to earth in front of the goats and monkeys, snarling them in the trailing net that flared with the spring breeze. The two birds cheered and kissed and cheered some more.

"Whew! I hope Private and Skipper are having a better weekend!"

Rico nodded before gasping, "Kwoskii, lookdere!"

A Native American officer directing all people away from danger, or so he thought, lost his footing as the net settled and was in harm's way himself. There was lots of thrashing inside the corded corral due to the panicked monkeys' incisors as they attempted to bite their way free, the officer's flailing nightstick, and churning goats' hooves before the goats fainted one by one.

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Aboard the blimp, Chuck Charles directed the cameraperson across the aisle from him to zoom onto the action on his side of the cabin and away from the parade on the operator's side. The man carefully made his way the few steps and took position between Chuck and Alice, who faced each other in seats which looked forward and backward. Chuck's voice deepened to the timbre used on unusual events such as launching a nuclear sub while he activated his throat mike.

"New Yorkers, you will never ever see a sight like this in your lifetime. I have never beheld such a spectacle in all my thirteen years as your anchorman and four years' morning drive time broadcasting in Walla Walla. I am gabberflasted, I mean flabbergasted." He subsided into quietude after a startled huh when Alice pressed her bulk against the camera operator. The man stumbled sideways into Chuck's Armani-clad knees before his professional attitude took over.

"Hey, watch it! The jiggle compensator on my camera does only so much, lady!"

Alice ignored him as she smacked her forehead over the involvement of zoo animals. She twisted in her window seat to point out the hullaballoo two hundred feet down to her friend who sat behind her. "You see, Filo? You see? I can't be gone for more than one minute --- "

"Calm down, chica. It's not good to get this upset." Filo reached over the seat to pat her friend's shoulder.

"I'll calm down when I'm down on the ground. Winning Zoo Worker Of The Year has got to mean more than getting a ride in a blimp and a two percent raise." Alice grimaced at the patting and leaned away as she peered out the spacious window head to head with Chuck. The operator growled and aimed his camera over their noggins. "What a mess! I suppose I'll need to step in."

Filo laughed hard enough to bounce her curls. "You're out of it. You can't do a goddam thing, so chill out. Don't spin your wheels, mamita."

Alice looked surprised as she peeked at Filo in the notch between the edge of her headrest and the window. "I never heard you cuss before, Filo."

Filo opted today for her usual uniform and tapped her badge as she leaned in to answer. "You haven't seen what I've seen as a peacekeeper, Alice. I've been first responder on scenes I'll never tell you about and sometimes there's just nothing you can do. Trust me, whoever trapped those runaways did a fantastic job. The officers in the park will mop up. Ay bomboncita, por que siempre te metes en problemas?"

Alice grumped as she settled forward once more. She, too, had chosen her usual outfit except for steel-toed oxfords replacing her high top boots. In rare whimsy, she wore Invader Zim socks. She spoke above the sounds of the Wingfoot's propulsion. "Yeah, maybe I can sit this one out given my circumstances. Ouch, I strained against my seat belt and my belly hurts now."

The cameraman ignored everything but acquiring the perfect shot as Chuck broke his silence. "What is happening? What do you want me to do? I don't know anything about --- "

"Crisis averted, Chuck. I'm on it." Filo stood and steadied her stance against the side of Alice's seat. She undid her friend's buckle and readjusted it before attaching it again. "Better?"

"Er, some. Thanks." Alice looked up into her friend's face and produced a rare smile. "You're a good pal, Filo."

The situation was just as agitated on the ground.
"We've got to help, Rico! The officer will be hurt!" Kowalski and Rico charged into the fray in their fastest slide yet.

For years afterwards, the officer endured being the butt of squadroom jokes for his tales of black and white dervishes freeing him and pulling the net's edges tight to contain the runaways. He could have sworn they saluted him before slipping from sight into the wilds of Central Park.
Chapter 39

Having expended their ready energy in nearly sixteen hours of swimming, two little penguins paused to determine the creek they needed to swim up to reach Howe Caverns. Three candidates formed a delta feeding into the rippling Mohawk and since it was already four p.m., there were only a few hours left of daylight to complete their trip. It was time to dig deep into reserves as Skipper allowed a break after they beached themselves.

"Ready for some training?"

"On holiday?"

Skipper put on what he hoped was a neutral face. "Let me take a mulligan. Ready for pleasant competition? Nonjudgmental experiment? Training for a half marathon for laid back hippies?"

Those words would sharpen any commando penguin's focus, tired or not. "I'm in."

Outstanding! "We're about to use the GPS and we haven't needed it before. Let's let Mama Nature try first. Close your eyes and point to where the sun will set."

The young penguin did himself proud. "There, where the meanderin' Mohawk merrily makes music."

"Yupperdoodle! Now dive inside yourself and ask yourself does this feel like I'm heading towards my goal?"

Private opened one eye. "It's a rum go to hear you talkin' about feelin's, honey."

"Don't tell anybody outside our rookery I did, just do it yourself. Orienteering is more difficult for us penguins away from the sea, so try extra hard. Well?"

Private concentrated once more as strain appeared on the features where there should be no strain. "I can't hear myself. My head's muddled as Pinkie's flock when they try to fly right after Alice clips their wings so they can't escape the habitat."

The dear bird always did his best to please. "Waddle with me." The two penguins trod one after the other in a tight circle, clockwise and counterclockwise in ten minute sets. "Faster." Now they power waddled, swinging flippers and stepping high.

Private panted, "Gettin' bushed, Skippa. Oughtn't we save our strength for swimmin' these last miles?"

It was time to change the playing field. "I'll try now, and then you." Skipper closed his eyes, pointed himself west and visualized the caverns as they had been described to him. His ulcers would act up sometimes when deploying this search engine inborn to any penguin's software, but not on this occasion. Because he asked it to, the planet reached out to his brain, subtly influencing his sense of direction through magnetism. Because his brain as well as his body was tired, there were no niggling worries as everything except this mission, no, this experiment, fell away. He knew what Private meant about being muddled, though, because he felt as if he had a hangover the second he began. He almost had the answer, but almost wasn't good enough when he could get both of them lost.

"Washington's wooden teeth, what do you know? I'm stumped, too. Let's deploy the fershlugginer smartphone and aim for a better connection to Mama Nature later."
"A smashin' idea." They plotzed together, back to back. Private dug out the device.

Skipper tackled the smartphone as he sat in concealing greenery beside the open Hello Kitty backpack. "Let's see now, slap this button to turn it on, poke this, jab this, shake this, crank this --- "

"Skippa, mightn't I do the GPS? As a part of my trainin', I mean?"

Skipper regarded the tech challenge in his tight grip. He nodded at last. "All right." He passed the smartphone to Private. "Remember how to do it?"

"K'walski was very thorough, so yes. But you can prompt me!"

Skipper detected a whiff of condescension wafting through their little midstream island haulout, but it was sensitively wrapped in gilt paper with a silver ribbon sparkling with love, so he'd go along with it. "A team effort? Seguro."

"Righto, then. Here we go!" Private swung around closer to share the screen view. "Phil preprogrammed key number five for Howe" --- he tapped --- "see, here are icons for car, walkin', train, bus, okay, we are swimmin', well, walkin' is what we'll need to put in, said K'walski" --- he stroked --- "oohh, only one more hour till arrival, Skippa!" --- he turned serious --- "now we get the directions." The smartphone spoke.

"Hike along Schoharie Creek Trail until you reach Cobleskill Creek Trail to the north. Cross the footbridge. Turn left on Cobleskill Creek Trail. If you have reached Esperance, you have gone too far."

Private looked skeptical. "That sounds premature, don't you think? I don't recognize Esperance from the list of towns we'd swim by that K'walski recited. Um, did I hit the wrong button? Are we truly only one hour out? Skippa?"

"We're a little way from what the phone lady said, so let me think some more." Skipper closed his eyes, turning his head to right and left as if using a homing satellite dish to find Channel One's broadcast of the Rangers games they would miss. He nodded firmly. "Yeah, we're close to the turn off the Mohawk, maybe a mile further." He smirked. "Mama Nature for the win."

"K'walski said there might be oopsies with the GPS and that we need to hang a left at Ft. Hunter for our second turn."

Peeking through the waving grasses and weeds towards a far shore, Skipper spied a middling sized town. "Yeah, he did. And there's a piece of Americana nearby for us both to admire because Schoharie Crossing shows the Erie Canal in its fading glory. Good old Phil says it's the best place to view what's left of the rocks and stuff, er you know, the engineering knowhow that opened up The West." His chest swelled with pride. "The Ewe Ess of Ay is patriotic numero uno to me."

"Will there be rubidium to tell Rico about in these rocks?"

Personalities, shmersonalities. "It's a historical site, babe, not exciting like Shinjen's legendary sword or like that kaboomy metal. It's worthwhile learning about all the same."

"Another bit of trainin' on holiday then, for me. Hmmmph."

"Deal with it." But Skipper's smile undid any command rigor.

Private wanted to kiss away the frown of intensity that creased his love's forehead as the elder bird set to work once more. The hiatus is endin' soon and I'm all atwitterpated! A little dizzy from
fatigue, he leaned his shoulder into Skipper's.

"I'm sensing, uh it's a strain so far from the ocean, but I'm sensing" --- oh, the voice tensed and Private frowned --- "that, that this island isn't quite far enough up the Mohawk for us to see any of these waterways to be our correct turn and besides, no creek looks as wide as Phil described the Schoharie. They look more like feeder creeks and we don't use one to reach the caverns until we're right there at the insert point. Let's use the finder app." He softened his touch on the device at Private's nudge until a feminine voice again spoke authoritatively.

"Hike along Schoharie Creek Trail until you reach Cobleskill Creek Trail to the north. Cross the footbridge. Turn left on Cobleskill Creek Trail. If you have reached Esperance, you have gone too far."

Skipper hmmmmed. "Yeah, we heard this before, lady. We're swimming, which is faster than walking, so I guesstimate one hour forty-five minutes from Ft. Hunter until beachhead at Howe." He flourished the smartphone as he tapped his forehead with his other flipper. "Mama Nature knowhow supported by good old American knowhow!"

Private leaned more heavily into the brawny shoulder. "No hurry, no hurry, the sun's still up at six and besides, I'm a bit tuckered from our long swim, aren't you?"

"We paced ourselves well but yes, I am a touch tuckered. A little more rest, a nice easy swim and we'll reach Howe." He looked around their wooded respite, which the smartphone named Upper Pepper Island. The comfortable gravel beach was laced with willowy withes of cottonwood that shushed musically in the light breeze. No leaves yet on the poplars, observed Skipper, but the catkins are growing already. He reached up to bat the nearest one and watched it sway before patting Hello Kitty on the backpack.

A sense of caution surged because the waters were still too high from winter's runoff to produce a summery murmur yet. Skipper quelled the surge because he would term the aquatic sounds nothing I can't handle even if we're both tired because I am physically superior and can save him if necessary. He put his flipper around Private's shoulders. "This is a peaceful place, Private. I feel, um, mellow? Is that what this is?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised, Skippa. Enjoy your accomplishment." He played some more with the smartphone.

Something had autocorrected in the GPS because at Private's next tap, the voice said, "Ft. Hunter is on your left. Continue through the town and turn left at the confluence of the Mohawk and Schoharie."

"There we go, the Catskills! A traditional relaxin' spot for us New Yorkers!" Private nuzzled Skipper's cheek. "Honey, I can't wait to settle into our cavern and see crystals every whichaway."

"Mmmhmm. Let's punch the street view of our present position since the gizmo's updated and see what we get." Skipper tapped the two arrows in a circly thing that Kowalski said provided street view. He closed his eyes in thought. "I think we have a match now and technology agrees. Nice."

"Do you feel north and south and everythin'? Because I do, a little." Private lifted his head from Skipper's shoulder and swiveled it.

Progress! His private rating of his private's maturity rose two points. Skipper placed the smartphone back into Hello Kitty's innards and sealed the fastener. "Now that the GPS is all sorted, let's head out. Good pussy, nice pussy, how dry you are inside." A tune bubbled up and he swayed in time at
the prospect of more adventure as he donned the backpack. "Oh I'm a pepper you're a pepper he's a pepper she's a pepper wouldn't you like to be a pepper, too?"

Private looked blank.

"Old TV commercial jingle."

Private tapped his temple.

"Carrie Manilow wrote it?"

Private smiled politely.

"We're on Upper Pepper Island? Dr. Pepper, Seven Up, tie in with sodas?"

Private scanned his surroundings and nodded.

"Never mind. Before your time, it seems."

Private seized the opening. "How old are you, Skippa?"

"That's not important, Mr. Nosey Beak."

"Well, no, but it's quite inte---"

"Let's launch!"

"Righto."

"Jump right in! ¡Rápidamente!"

The group of high-spirited adolescent Sea Scouts jostling each other on the wooden observation deck above them reminded Skipper of the times he had played under the boardwalk in Atlantic City with any number of nubile females, some of whom had even been penguins. He had never been spotted by humans peeking down through the slats and was not going to start now.

Skipper pushed down deep the memory of their ghastly approach from the feeder creek to the caverns over a broad meadow with barely sprouting grasses for cover. There had been no time to check out the gift shop for thimbles as they sidled through the building and gained the caverns proper through holes only large enough for penguins. His battle mind seized on the idea of exiting through the natural opening of the cave when they left for home, rather than re-braving the building and all those human feet. Sentimental Private would likely try to talk him out of giving up on the thimble, though, because he was sweet as the sugary caramel on a Christmas croquembouche.

Icy rushing waters were normally inviting to any self-respecting penguin. Private hesitated. "Wot's on the other side?"

Skipper was antsy for leisure to enjoy the glittery drapes, ripples, and creamy flowstone rather than skulking under a deck. "I haven't looked at the GPS yet! Adventure is part of the reason we came! Jump in or I'll push you, come on! You wanted this vacation!"

Private eyed the underground lake that turned into a torrent as it drained into unknown depths at the far end of the part of Howe Caverns explored by humans. He supposed that it came out miles ahead as a lesser torrent spewing from limestone crags to add to Cobleskill Creek. It was what was between
here and there that gave him pause. The pink, gold and blue globes the humans had added for atmosphere and, of course, lighting seemed mystical --- hang about, mystical?

Private shook his head. Why did that word echo in his brain as much as the boyish voices echoed in the caverns? The chatter from the group standing on the observation platform above his head grew louder as they pushed and shoved each other. There was a good chance he and his skipper would be noticed. What if the river didn't come out aboveground but continued down, down into the mystic --- there was that word again --- reaches of the earth?

"If we wait longer here, the last boatload for the day of happy turistas will float by. Count of ten, Private! Nine - eight - seven - sixfivefourthree ---"

"Two - here we go!" Private pushed Skipper in and spiraled behind him and to the left. Down, down they sped, two penguins frolicking in their best environment. What awkwardness they displayed on land disappeared as their sleek black and white torpedo shapes sliced through the black waters. Onward, onward to the farthest reaches of the cavern that were visible to humans they pushed to finally pop up just before the passage narrowed to fit only penguins. The Howes Cavern tour guide on loan from New York State's Park Police didn't notice them, but an observant Sea Scout did.

"Look!"

The ranger spun from his position facing the tour group to peer into the gloom behind him. "Where away?"

"Fifteen degrees to port!"

It had been a long time since New York State Forest Ranger Rick Esparza had been a Sea Scout himself, but he homed in on the mark after a moment's thought port left starboard right. "Is that --- are those penguins?" His bass came out a squeak right before his jaw dropped.

"Maybe they're mallards!"

"Naw, canvasbacks!"

"Mallards, stupid!"

"You're all wrong, they were buffleheads, right, Rick?"

Seven pairs of teen eyes looked to him for guidance. He closed his mouth, scratched his Lincolnesque beard and gathered himself before replying.

"They were not mallards or wood ducks or any sort of duck. They were penguins." He wouldn't fib to these bright lads. "I'm prepared to say to you that we have seen penguins today. What a trip when you guys tell your leader, wow!" He thought for a moment and sighed. "If this gets out, there'll be a news conference and meetings with my superiors who will likely give me administrative leave without pay because they will think I'm loopy. Your parents will want answers and guys, the whole penguin scenario is awfully unlikely." Rick let his words hang in the dank air of the cavern. Of course, he liked dank and dark and spooky or he wouldn't have requested this assignment. "I need that regular paycheck, fellas."

One bespectacled Scout in the back spoke up after a full minute. "Actually, given that our latitude is nowhere near any sort of penguin environment, it's not likely they were penguins."

"They were penguins! They were!" The youngest Scout bounced on his toes. "They were dope!"
"Men, think about it. Do we want publicity?" By calling them men Rick showed them respect and okay, played into their egos. He saw them actually think and gave them two minutes of grinding their mental gears before speaking again. "I know I don't. And considering how canvasbacks have large amounts of near white feathers --- hence the name --- it's reasonable that we saw them rather than penguins."

The youngest would not be deterred, plus he had a lot of knowledge. Rick predicted trouble with him even though he had played the dreaded your parents will find out card. The boy's voice cracked as he spouted, "But but but canvasbacks aren't black and white, okay white-ish, and and they have chestnut colored heads --- "

The rest had concluded what Rick hoped they would. Already, they hovered on the cusp of adulthood with its reverence of status quo. He hated to step on their adventurous spirit in a way, although they had to learn sometime that it was mostly desirable to leave well enough alone. He hurried to reassure himself. This would become a mystery as they went through life, wondering what penguins were doing swimming in this locale, where they came from, where they were going and how the heck they had gotten underground. Ahah, he could foster the lure of the unknown that he had felt at their age!

Rick felt marginally better about himself.

He stepped in with the one good trick he'd learned from Ranger To Youth Encouragement class. Engage them in any conflict you have with them and make them think how to solve it themselves, said his instructor, by asking one simple question. In other words, smack the ball back into their court. He asked the question. "What do you think I'm going to say next?"

Their replies touched his heart.

Kid Number Six replied first. "That you'll mark down our evaluation if we don't agree with you?"

Number Four was practical. "That you really, really need a steady paycheck because you've got a baby?" He went on after Rick's blink of surprise. "I saw a baby seat in a New York Nature Services jeep when we walked through the parking lot."

Number Seven was truly up on his birds, yet anthropomorphism flavored his response. "That buffleheads are open sea ducks only and shun the underground because they're claustrophobic?"

Number One was way off. "That you love your job to be uninterrupted?"

Oh ho, Number Two had been thinking overtime. "That you are in a Witness Protection Program so publicity is a bad thing? What crime did you see? Was it something heinous to animals?"

Um, okay, time to put a stop to this. Rick had his mouth open to speak when the youngest, Number Five, came up with the perfect diversion. "Aw, guys, I guess they were canvasbacks after all. I need them for my Life List and I've already seen penguins. Lemme have this, okay?" The boy winked at Rick.

Rick clapped the kid on his shoulder. "Way to go growing up, men. There ought to be a merit badge for that. I'll make do with an extra citation for citizenship for the lot of you." He cast a last look at the farthest visible end of the lake where he'd never gone.

Torrents swooshed through hanging crystalline curtains of calcite and the overhead lights from their lookout point barely reached the limits of this part of the cavern. Through the sounds of glubbing water, he spoke to the dark where he thought he saw two black heads submerge. "Good luck
wherever you're headed, penguins," he whispered before turning back to his responsibilities. "Now, kids I mean men, who's up for snowcones at the snack bar outside?"

Number Three spoke up at last. "Me!"

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Chapter 40

Kowalski debriefed Rico as the two lounged beside their pH-balanced pool with Faux Skipper and Plushie Private slung between them. Now and then, Rico waved Plushie Private's flipper. Kowalski settled for jiggling Faux Skipper to simulate life as they practiced being a foursome for when the crowds appeared later. The spring sunshine today braved the intermittent clouds for a psychedelic Sunday strobe.

"So I visited the chimps and Phil signed after he looked it up online that, get this, unlike Alex wherever he is now, the male spider monkeys in any troupe, well Alex would be in a pride, have closer bonds and are more likely to be related than the females, who direct the troupe where to forage on any given day. I asked about psychotic tendencies in the species, but Phil fell off his stool laughing and Mason couldn't get any more out of him. I wonder why he laughed." Kowalski shrugged. "It's infodump without helping me understand why they went nuts. We'll just have to stay sharp. Oh right, something kind of cute about the males is that they form lifelong bonds in their troupe."

"Yadoansay." Rico feared a gut upset when hearing mushy love stuff and wondered at himself when it didn't happen. He patted Kowalski's flipper. "Zatzsweet."

Kowalski reciprocated and went on. "Male bonding goes against elephant and lion group behavior, Rico, and supports my new theory that females are co-equal in leadership qualities, depending on the species. Oh, I suspected it, but it's nice to have the data verified, you know? Since that is the conclusion, maybe I will end my experiment to discover the female principle using Marlene's DNA. You've got to admit that the specimen's size is becoming a problem."

"Wubbouthmalen?"

Kowalski snorted. "Male? We are males, we don't need to experiment with us! We're the unmarked case! We're the control!"

Rico examined his chest, belly, both flippers and both legs. "Yahnomarks." He licked his scar as an afterthought. "Ceptdis."

"Rico. Markedness means we predict or cause another mark but we are the base, baby. It's also known as Δp in simple two-choice cases in linguistics or social sciences. Think hard about it and you'll understand."

Rico made a swooshing motion over his head. "Datyourbag, baby."

With a whoop and a splash, Marlene shot up as if from an underwater railgun to join them on their island. "Hi, guys! Whatcha doing?"

Kowalski smiled. "Using the conduit between our habitats again, eh, lady? It's a good thing our battle nerves are used to sudden appearances and disappearances of personnel."

Rico made himself let go of Plushie Private from the toy's defensive position on his lap. "'Eenie, hi." He replaced Plushie Private at his side.

Marlene seemed full of herself in the early light. "Hi, Rico. Isn't it going to be a gorgeous day? Don't you feel filled with possibilities?"

"'Eenichpay."
"Um, yeah, I just think the humans have a great idea for a Half Marathon, not as la dee dah serious as a full marathon and funner than a fun run, no funner is not a word. Today's the day and it makes me feel all, oh I don't know, bodacious? Is that a word, Kowalski?"

"It's one of my favorites, Marlene." He looked around surreptitiously out of habit. "It's a real word, too, unlike catastrotunity, whatever some skippers say."

Marlene made a big show of framing her eyes like binoculars to peer around the faux floe. "Where are Skipper and Private, no don't tell me if they're not up yet because they're tired out from a Saturday night full of, uh -"

"Dey gone."

Rico mimicked the motions of swimming, diving and what Marlene took to be hugging. He pointed to the substitute penguins.

The otter looked wise. "Secret mission long enough to need decoys?"

"Vacation." Kowalski considered Marlene's surprised face. "Yes, vacation. Even commandos need vacations."

"Oh! They took my advice!" Marlene skipped around the two birds in a happy little dance that ended in a cartwheel. "Wow, that's abfab!"

"Eh?"

"Wuzzatyouzay, 'Eenie?"

Marlene aborted her third cartwheel. "Just, um, that vacations are good for what ails you. I mean, them."

Rico relented as he adjusted Plushie Private again but Kowalski homed in on the mystery. "What does ail them? What do you know and when did you know it?"

"That's classified." Marlene had been aching to say those words to a penguin, any penguin, and w00t, this was the perfect occasion.

Kowalski narrowed his eyes as he lifted a flipper to make a point, but as he shifted his weight forward, the spring breeze heisted unsecured Faux Skipper into the air. Kowalski made an ungainly leap for the blow-up dolly, missed, and it took Rico's lightning fast deployment of a plunger to drag down the wayward bird. All three animals looked around quickly even though it was an hour before Alice came on duty.

It also took Rico to defuse the situation with a wise look of his own as he settled back onto his lounge chair. "Kwoskii, 'EeniezShattenkirk."

This didn't quite work the way Rico intended. "I am not! I did not! I would never do that in a place like, like that!" Marlene gasped.

Kowalski tented his flippers after laying his thigh as anchor on Faux Skipper's faux feet, which were permanently fused at their inner edges. "Of course you wouldn't. Never mind the question, I don't need to know everything."

At Marlene's and Rico's double take, Kowalski looked embarrassed. "What? I realize a few things can remain unsaid. Dr. Phil would say the same. That's what makes a team a team and Kevin Shattenkirk the perfect defenseman for the Rangers. You, Marlene, wish to defend Private's privacy and Skipper's skipperness. That's okay by my abacus calculations and sometime maybe you'll do it
for me or Rico or we'll do it for you oh you know what I mean, Marlene.

"Marlene recognizes flattery when Marlene hears it," muttered Marlene but she plotzed on the cement to catch the in-and-out sun on her back as she faced them. She assumed a lotus position while peace resumed.

As opening time neared, Marlene stretched right and left to limber up for her morning play for the guests. She touched her toes and joined in with the penguins' situps, jumping jacks, and fifty-six uttanasanas.

Marlene glowed with confidence and a bit of sweat. "What's up with my little buddy? You know, the Mini Me? She's thirteen weeks old now. Is she doing anything new?" She elbowed Kowalski. "C'mon, 'Ski, dish."

"Let's just take a look, hmmmm?" Kowalski led the way to his lab, towing Faux Skipper. "Rico, save me from it if it's broken out again from its crystal containment unit. It's more mobile since maturity."

"Save you? She's dangerous? Oh come on, the female principle isn't dangerous, really you guys." At the expressions on their faces, she placed her paws on her hips. "It's not. Different from you, yes, but not dangerous."

Kowalski and Rico exchanged looks before they both opened the lab door in exaggerated caution. "It didn't threaten us, but it wasn't where I put it when we came back from lunch. Rico fashioned a more secure, uh, home for it."

Inside the lab, the crystal containment unit once housing a single Petri dish sprouting a growth resembling a baobab had been exchanged for a larger crystal cage housing a green otter simulacrum. The being stood as tall as Marlene with delicate moss for fur and a right foot frosted with tiny white blooms. The resemblance to the source was uncanny.

Marlene walked slowly around the cage. With wide eyes, she stood face to face with herself, more or less. The simulacrum stood with closed eyes, chest softly sighing with inspirations. "Wh-What's that on her head?"

A raffia-like structure resembling a noose looped around a horizontal top bar ending with another noose around the green neck. Marlene trembled as she stood as close to her body double as she could, the chill of the crystal cage riffling her nipples as she pressed in.

"It grew that stem before I entered this morning. It must have manufactured it last night." Kowalski frowned. "It ate its spirulina while we were topside, see, Rico? There's none on the cage floor where I put it at first light."


"Is she offing herself? No, her feet are on the floor. She's still breathing!"

Rico hugged Marlene's waist and she leaned against his burly strength. "Sheznotyou'Enie."

"Well, duh, Rico, I know, it's just that I feel, um, responsible for my own DNA." Marlene broke away to circle the cage once more. "Everything is like me, right down to my, I mean her, tail." She knocked knuckles on a clear bar without rousing the creature. "Wake up, lady."

Kowalski entered on his clipboard a drawing of Marlene facing off her doppelganger. He drew surprise lines coming from Marlene, a comic book technique from long ago that Rico had taught him.
He thrust the clipboard in front of him as a barrier to Marlene's heated questions.

"Is she living? Why do you guys keep her in prison? You can't any longer. I'm taking over." Marlene jiggled the cage door. "Give me the key."

Dr. Phil had no precedent for this situation. Kowalski looked to his love, who looked right back, shrugging. The scientist forged a new path from his own wisdom. "I don't mind letting you open the cage, Marlene, although I caution you the specimen is like nothing you've ever met. As a man of science, I hesitate to use the word magical. Its abilities I could study for years, or maybe use a motion cam for when the little pixie scampers about when nobody sees. I've got other fish to fry, though, in the science department, some more personal fish. More important fish." He hugged Rico's neck and nodded permission.

Rico passed the key silently to the otter. With a disparaging sniff, Marlene unlocked the door and stunned both penguins by stepping inside, closing the door and passing the key back to Rico. "I'm not afraid of her. She's me or close enough."

Rico's alarmed gabble made Kowalski clamp his partner's beak shut. "Don't wake it, Rico."

Marlene was a whisper from the green body so like her own. Carefully, she undid the noose from the top bar. It came away from the crystal and the green neck although it had looked to be sprouting from the thing's collarbone. She dropped it to the cage floor. "Wakies, um - "

Kowalski's hushed voice said a name Marlene had never heard. "I've named it Makaliporn."

"You just made that up." Marlene did not touch the figure, but her lips almost brushed a green ear as she spoke quiet words of encouragement into it. The regular respirations continued.

Kowalski was in his expository element. "It's a real name, strange but true. Makaliporn are mythical Thai trees that sprout female forms - like pod people, right you are, Rico, er only this one is a pod otter - to guard a god's wife from dishonor by being her decoy. The pods have the same internal organs as humans and the higher animals, but no bones. These pod ladies also have magic powers and can dance and sing. If they are not picked from the tree, they wither and die after seven days, but - "

"I plucked her, and now she's going to be all right. That's logical." Marlene pursued the subject. "Remember how she aped my movements when I saw her last? I bet I can get her to do that again. Come on, Makali. I'm leaving off the last part of your name, girl. Come on, baby, wake up, sugar."

Wow, and Kowalski had thought Private saffared into LaLaLand with his lunacorns. "Logical doesn't apply in this stage of the case. I created it with your help and gave it a whimsical name. It's an experiment and frankly, I am considering terminating it. 'Eenie, it's not you and it's not your baby. Get a grip."

Marlene huffed. "What about the female principle, huh what about that? Giving up because you can't hack it or pin it down?" Now she was sitting at the still figure's feet, her toes almost touching her double's.

Rico growled.

"No, Rico, let me handle this. Marlene, you're right."

That snapped Marlene back onto the outskirts of reality. "I am? Um, of course I am! Amn't I?"

"I've concluded that the best definition of the female principle is a co-equal relationship with the male
principle in order to create and sustain life." The universe held its breath at this revelation, or so it seemed to Kowalski and he beamed at the theory itself, for once quite independently of who had created it. "I can use this for a very important future experiment."

Rico made another swooshing motion over his head. He hopped up onto the lab table and sat because this was going to take awhile.

Marlene was deeply unimpressed. "Pblblblbl. Like you need to strut in front of me, 'Ski, you and your theories. I could have told you that you're headed in the right direction, even if I don't know the full and absolute truth of the female thingy. You have it halfway, my friend, because there is more to ladies than relationships." She braved touching the great toe of her double with her own, sneaking a look up into the face, but the eyes did not open nor did the body move. "You know what, maybe there isn't a full and absolute truth."

"Well, well, well. We agree." Kowalski allowed the germ of the idea to settle into Marlene's psyche. He noticed her space out again as she contemplated the thing's tail, patting it absently. "Shall we leave you two alone?"

"Yeahhhhhhh," Marlene breathed. A modicum of practicality filtered through. "Leave the lab door open."

"We'll come running at the first scream. Let's go, Rico."

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"Wakey wakey, Marlene. Uppies, my friend."

Marlene roused her cheek from its place against a tender green chest. "Hurgh. Mmmmmm. smack I taste like, like Clorets." She chomped her jaws and ran a digit over her tongue. "blep Not bad, actually." She blinked and sat rigidly after examining bits of moss that clung to her white bib of fur. "Whoa!"

"Yes, you and Makaliporn hit it off. You must have dozed."

"Ew, I got some of her on me. How did - what did she - huh?"

Rico giggled as Marlene rose swiftly and brushed her front. Kowalski's voice was stern. "Time to have breakfast and go to work because it's eight fifty-four."

Marlene kept both eyes on the green otter who sat on the cage floor with legs asprawl. She backed against the door to gesture through the bars at Rico. He unlocked the door and she stepped through. "I wasn't sleepy before getting next to her. I didn't see her move. I didn't hear her move. She never opened her eyes that I know of. She and I, um, what's the word - "

"Snuggld,'Enie." Rico's face was prim as he relocked the cage.

Marlene continued staring at the somnolent body. "She was soft like my mom was or like my baby would be, well you said she doesn't have bones, Kowalski - "

" - according to the legend, but it's not Thai, Marlene, because I made it."

It must have taken a great deal for Marlene to admit her next words. "You're right. She's an experiment. Do what you want with her. She's too spooky to live, er, exist oh you know what I mean." Her eyes dilated until all Kowalski could see was a thin ring of amber. "Aw no, it's nearly nine?"
"Eight fifty-seven point two."

She drooped. "The Half Marathon is almost over. I wanted to sneak out and see part of it. Oh darn."

"We're not going because Rico and I had our excitement yesterday. Barring emergencies, we plan to enjoy a usual Sunday entertaining the guests, who, by the by, will troop through at ten. I'll bet today's sparse attendance equals yesterday's because of the event, right, Rico?"

Rico's mind was on other things. "Feeeeeeesh!"

Two stomachs growled. "Yeah, I could nosh, too. Join us, Marlene? Oh wait, you'll need to put in an appearance at your own habitat."

Marlene thought fast. "I'll skip breakfast and let Alice think I'm sleeping in. Since the race stops in Central Park, I can see the ending! Go, me!" She bolted out the lab door and up the ladder, dropping a "Bye!" from the hatch cover before she secured it.

Makaliporn's eyes opened.

Rico backed away from the cage as he double checked the lock. The blank gaze from mossy eyeballs unnerved him. "Hooboy. Kwoskii?"

Kowalski turned from straightening the contents on the lab shelves. Makaliporn stood and walked straight through the cage bars in two halves, gathering speed as it exited the lab. Somehow being rent vertically stem to stern did not halt motor communication between neurons or dendrons or dentrites or chloroplasts or whatever the George Washington Carver it had.

"It's alive or near enough! Come on, Rico, let's go, big fella!"

Rico ran first in the chase as Kowalski pawed through the lab shelves frantically.

Kowalski heard him screech in the main room. He seized the freeze ray and joined in pursuit.

Rico stood immobile by the foot of the ladder, transfixed by the boggling sight.

"It's reblending its halves!" cried Kowalski. He aimed his weapon at the figure who halted with one foot on the bottom rung and then froze in place himself.

Makaliporn faced the two commandos as she slid one green paw from the stem on her crown and ran it down her bifurcated forehead to her torso. The mosses meshed together once more to end at her split crotch. She sealed that gap with a firm rub that mesmerized Kowalski and Rico. Before the two could break out of their stupor, she placed both paws on her head and rubbed up there, too. The stem disappeared into her head and she looked enough like Marlene to render them speechless. Kowalski recovered first.

"Huh. Howboutdat," he slurred.

"Yah."

Mental sludge slowed their reactions as Makaliporn oozed up the ladder, moved the food dish cover and disappeared for parts unknown. They observed that the broken back was now grown together, too. The freeze ray clattered to the floor from Kowalski's numb grip.

"After - it!"

"Yah."
"Come - on!"

"Yah."

"I'll - go - first - you - fol - low."

"Yah."

Step by straining step, Kowalski forced his feet to waddle and then sprint after the fleeing faux otter. He caught sight of it running on all fours in the direction Marlene had taken, or so he surmised because the Half Marathon was set to conclude at Central Park West someplace around The Lake. Was it Strawberry Fields? Was it the Ladies Pavilion? Was it 72nd Street? Gah, he hadn't paid attention after their energy-draining excursion yesterday! Skipper would fish slap him when he returned and he'd deserve it!

He soldiered on, power sliding taking the place of a sprint. All his senses rushed back to normal as he heard Alice's boots clomp someplace in the zoo, he smelled fresh timothy hay she'd dumped into Roy's habitat, he felt the brick path debriding one sixteenth of an inch off his belly feathers as he slid, he tasted possible defeat in his beak, and he beheld his love out of the corner of his eye in ever faithful support.

It wasn't fair that their calm peace was no more. "Why couldn't it dance or sing like a real Makaliporn? What does it want with Marlene? Why did it muddle our minds with her whatever-it-was? Our minds are where we live!"

"Kwoskii, shaddapnslide."

"You always know the right thing to say, Rico."

On and on they slid, chasing Marlene and Marlene's spectre through their main zoo exit of Tunnel Number Two and into the park proper, where the dew from the lawn wetted their fronts. Only a few humans jogged at this hour or planted themselves in prime picnic tables to claim them with a warm body for a later family picnic. It was a weird beginning to their relaxing Sunday.

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With the Goodyear blimp circling above, the finish line was easy to spot. Marlene scurried behind a dawn redwood tree at Strawberry Fields. Its needles barely sprouted but the craggy buttresses covered with bark at the base offered plenty of cover for an otter of dainty size. A baby in a stroller was being shuttled back and forth a few inches at a time by a chatting mom as she indulged in a rare moment of adult conversation during the day. At least, Marlene remembered her mom glorying in adult conversation with the Aquarium folks when Marlene was a youngster. The recollections dimmed as Marlene discovered a bulging root hiding a nook in the tree's trunk just her size.

Having humans all around didn't bother the baby, of course, and Marlene waved at him or her. A unisex green knit hat matching its onesie gave no clue to sex and the round face showed little bone structure to judge, either. Marlene grinned and the baby grinned back with two pearly teeth showing.

"Hey cutiepie, keep me on the down low, okay sweety?"

A tumult of racers approached as the mother joined her friend in cheering at the finish line. "Come on, Ben!" hollered the mom, pushing the baby back and forth vigorously. The baby squealed in joy.

Marlene forgot her cover since all the adults faced the finish line. She perched atop the buttress before deciding to scurry like a squirrel above the crowd. People bustled below her, chanting. "Ben
True! Ben True! Ben True!" Ben was the name she had chosen in girlish daydreams for her firstborn, and she became excited. She must see what she came to see!

The pounding of many human feet approached and the crowd screamed. Marlene hooked her short claws into the rough bark, which allowed traction as she climbed. Not being graced with either Fred's sharper claws or his hind feet that rotated so he could descend head first, getting back down might prove a problem.

Marlene scampered upwards anyway, because what was life without a challenge? She'd jump down, she'd try a flying otter pose like a flying squirrel pose, or she would backflip. She'd do it however she could and dismissed thoughts of any future beyond the next minute.

There was the front runner! His otter-colored hair drenched with sweat, his blue eyes showing only determination, he was an attractive human who gave this effort his all. He'd likely never known a moment of boredom in his life.

She fell a little bit in love.

As she watched, he burst through the banner and was declared winner. "Ben! Ben! You're a ten!" she cheered. Others clustered seconds behind him, *clomp stride push*, and soon all the main runners ended their race. A crowd surrounded the buttresses of her tree and sixteen children treated it as a maypole in their leaping dance.

Uh oh.

Wouldn't you know it, she'd picked a solitary standing tree, magnificent in itself as it reached sunward without belonging to a grove containing other trees to which she might jump. She whispered in automatic reflex. "Skipper, help."

Skipper couldn't help this time.

The crowd bustled together, congratulating the runners. Some members were friends or relatives of the runners and offered them drinks or towels for their comfort. A few spread robes over the shoulders of heaving, gasping men and women who grinned in triumph as they walked off the burn to take care of their muscles properly.

"Marlene, what next?" she squeaked to herself.

Ten minutes later, many humans dispersed into the park as mounted officers made their rounds. It might be safe to scramble down now. She assayed a trial move off the branch twenty feet up. Her claws dug in as much as they could, but she still slipped. With a gasp, she made it back to the branch where she shaded her eyes against the angle of the morning sun to plan her next foray. Movement caught her gaze.

"Rico? Kowalski? Me?"

*Makali.* It was Makali who struggled in the two commandos' grip twelve feet from the base of her tree. As Marlene watched, they handled the experiment with great care, switching from a grip to making themselves into a strait jacket. They hustled Makali into cover consisting of a rose bush tipped with buds presaging a June blossoming. Marlene saw before they disappeared into the greenery that they hugged Makali between them by hugging each other, moving their flippers up and down to - to - contain - the female - principle -

Marlene gasped.
Parts of Makali tore off in the kerfluffle, the tail here, a toe there. Right before the mossy head vanished into the rose bush, Marlene spied Makali's eyes, green and expressionless. Why did she imagine a purpose in the blank stare?

They didn't know she was up here. A smaller group of humans remained after the excitement of the half marathon, dwindling slowly into twos and threes as they strolled. She chanced tossing a redwood cone into the bush, two inches of message that they must understand.

Nothing.

She tried again with a three incher.

Two heads emerged from the rose's sprouting leaves, tracking the vector of the missile. She waved.

Rico made to wave back until Kowalski pecked his love's flipper and it vanished back into the leaves. "Rico, I love you, dude, but keep her confined, please," Marlene muttered. Now this was a pickle.

Why was Makali in the park? Did she sense that Kowalski intended to terminate her and rebelled? Marlene herself would rebel, if even a spark of spirit lived in such an outrageous body. Were the penguins trying to keep their experiment covert? How in the world did the action wind up at the base of this very dawn redwood tree out of all the trees in the park?

Two heads once again peered upward at her, Kowalski gesturing with his noggin for her to join them. She shrugged a no, pantomiming a swan dive and then smacking her paws together to indicate a splat when she would hit the ground.

Two heads conferred.

Three more minutes passed and the humans within view thinned to one and then none. A solitary mounted patrol clipclopped on pavement before stepping delicately and quietly onto the park's muffling sod.

Marlene spoke in a strained whisper that she knew they would hear. "Guys? What's with Makali?"

Kowalski's baritone was muffled. "We don't know. It ran after you and split itself in two and then healed itself, I mean itself - it's a long story."

"'Eenie kay?"

Dear bird friend, such a dependable friend, well they both were. "Fine, yeah, I always wanted a split level townhouse with twenty feet between the floors, cones to throw, branches to swing from, birds' nests to paint. I'm good, how are you?"

"Supadeedoopah!" arose from the bush.

"That was sarcasm, Rico."

"Oh."

Makali remained mute as the penguins awkwardly hug-waddled out from cover with her between them, snug as a fuzzy green rug between two black and white bugs. The rose's thorns had ripped off her left ear.

Marlene thought a spell. "If I fall, can you catch me? I'll try not to."
"Let's see. Twenty feet up, maximum acceleration of - Marlene, how much do you weigh?"

"Gentlemen don't ask ladies that question."

"I'll calculate with fifteen pounds -"

"Hey!"

"Gotcha, twelve pounds."

"Maybe you're right, maybe you're wrong, I'm not saying."

"Twelve it is!" Without or with his abacus, Kowalski's brain was a wonder. "You'll reach 26 miles per hour in falling approximately one point two seconds. We'll catch you easily, end of story."

Marlene pondered. Now and then, the penguins had failed her, such as when Skipper suspected her of being a space squid in disguise. She stepped out in faith anyway. "Here I come!"

One hind foot bit into the bark, the other one scrabbled. One front paw caught, the other one caught as she set forth. She slid eighteen inches in tenuous control and then a slick part of the trunk left her flailing before falling backwards. "Aaaaahhh! Lost it!"

She would forever remember the chaotic parts of the next split seconds: the dawn redwoods spire reaching eternally towards the sun, the wind sloughing through her fur, the sense that she ought to spreadeagle to slow her progress, the sickening knowledge that she would land on her back for crippling or death.

Then a cradle comforted all her bones and she was safe, with two relieved penguin faces above her. "Th-Thanks, you two. Thanks."

Rico and Kowalski looked at each other, unspeaking as they blinked slowly. They still held her.

"Guys?"

Kowalski's mouth moved like a fish's trying to separate oxygen from air.

Rico appeared as he did when he blanked his mind.

"Guys? You can put me down."

They remained as before, so Marlene turned onto her stomach in order to edge her feet downwards and support her own weight. She was all right, thank you very much. Life was never boring when penguins entered her day, and this sort of thing happened all the -

Their flippers held her, it was true, but they held her on a flaking green cushion as if she were the wedding ring on a delicate ringbearer's pillow in a royal wedding. As Marlene watched, the moss head of Makaliporn fell to the ground and the simulacrum crumbled to patches of green. "Aaaah! What's going on?"

She launched herself from their grip. They seemed far, far away, pupils dilated to the size of quarters, still silent, still frozen.

A warning neigh broke the quietude. "Coming your way, Marlene," Penny whickered. "Go covert because my partner may be the sharpest tool in the NYPD, but even he can't smell you and the penguins like I can. Fair warning." Penny's hooves scuffed through the park's leaf litter as she moved deliberately in their direction. "I'll amble as slow as I can."
"Guys! Wake up!"

"Hmm - yawn - Rico, love, time to get up - "

"Fihiveminmore - "

"Kowalski! Rico! Move out, march, double time! Left, hiyah left, hiyah left right left - " Marlene pushed the two birds who were still hugging. They stumbled towards her original nock at the tree's base where they overflowed the space. She jumped onto their heads to cram them in and then spread herself over their black and white heads, hoping to blend in her brown fur with the brown of the trunk. Their stark hues would certainly stand out to a human amidst the earth tones - ack! Her white foot!

She jammed the offending limb behind Rico's back, shut her eyes and folded her head onto her paws.

Penny mumbled, "Good job, girlfriend," as she walked sedately past. Her passenger was a picture postcard of a mounted officer, scanning vigilantly for human safety issues as he rode upright in the saddle.

Marlene waited five minutes before rolling off her two friends. "I never want to go through anything like the last ten minutes of my life. What the heck got into you two?"

Rico's eyes were back in focus. "Makli did."

Kowalski could speak beyond the basics now. "Marlene, Makaliporn followed you here. Did it know you needed her to fall on? What happened in the lab between you and it?"

Marlene thought back as she brushed bits of Makali off Rico's belly. "N-Nothing bad. I remember feeling relaxed and then it seemed the most natural thing on earth to rest with her." She gasped. "Did she put a spell on me?"

Kowalski picked up Makali's head, the only recognizable bit among the blobs of green. The eyes hinted at nothing now to Marlene. She put her paws on her hips and glared at the head. "Well, did you mess with me, lady?"

"Makali's gone, Marlene. It is no more." Respect infused Kowalski's words. "It made it easy for us to catch you."

"Well, yeah, I can see that - whoa. I really can see." Marlene took the head from Kowalski. Gently, she braced the face as she held it up to hers. "Female principle is only a theory, 'Ski, and this is reality. She was smart without saying a word." She turned to her friends. "She guided you to the perfect spot to catch me?"

"Yah, nourhedz. Wedunces."

This was too extreme for Kowalski to agree to. "Oh we were not, Rico. We would have caught Marlene anyhow - "

"Maklibedderaddit."

Marlene placed Makali's head inside the niche of her hiding space. "I think she got inside my wants and knew that I needed to see a race, a, a, success for someone. I saw two today, hers and Ben's. She lost her freedom when she bonded with me but he's free to run another day." She dropped last year's dry brown leaves one by one to cover the face. "She ought to have never reached out to me, or I
ought to never have touched her oh I'm confused."

Rico was solemn. "Maklied." His beak drooped. "Liekenochi."

Kowalski put his flipper around Rico's waist and made an impatient face. "Rico, it was never alive like Xochi, it wasn't even a houseplant."

"Stop." Rico and Marlene spoke at once.

Kowalski slapped himself. "Dratted excitement these past two days! I forgot! I told Skipper and Private I'd videocam the blimp for them and" - he sneaked a look around and then stepped boldly out onto Strawberry Fields, looking upward - "and it's departed for its next destination now that the half marathon is done. I had chances and I muffed them. Drat drat drat."

Rico and Marlene joined Kowalski as he frowned at the sky. They each took a flipper and dragged him down to the good solid earth between them where they sat tailor fashion. "Nothing to get hung about," Marlene said. "Strawberry Fields forever, 'Ski."

IOIOIOIOIO
"Frances Lajka Brigid Alberta. Wake up."

The firm voice bounced inside Frances' head from ear to ear and from her cranium to her jawline. She had not told Godmother Felicity, Moley or Jeff her middle names and the only person on this continent who knew them was - "Mom?"

Sweetly sublime as soan papdi, the scent of her mother's Wind Song favorite fragrance filled Frances' being. Frances opened her eyes or maybe thought she did. If this is why the orichas beckoned to her to visit Howe Caverns, then the mystery was solved. She was meant to commune with her dead mother. Even as the thought coalesced, she divined that there was a more hidden reason, as well. In the meantime, Mom was waiting.

The caverns loomed black as sin, Moley big spooned her on their spread blanket to conserve body warmth as his breath riffled her hair and within arm's reach was a Maglite. She could switch it on. She didn't.

"I am your mother, dear."

Frances couldn't help sobbing. "Mom, Mommy, oh, Mom - "

"It's all right. I am fine, better than fine. Now what is this all about?"

"Wh-What? What is what about?"

"Keep your voice down. You'll awaken your friend."

Moley twitched and rolled over so they lay back to back. He'd removed his belt and shoes to rest and so had she. "Mom, meet my drzhp, Moley. He's a good sort when he's awake."

Frances strained her eyes until they ached. It was no use. She'd never see her mother again this side of the spirit world, but to hear her voice, though ... ahhhhhh, bliss.

"Drzhp? Eh, you always had a gift for languages, Frances. Is he your significant other?" Moley had pulled the blanket off her shoulders when he moved and she tugged it back over her upper arms. The mother-daughter conversation ebbed and flowed as it had when Mom came to her bedroom to tuck her in.

"I guess he is? We've not yet - um - done what it takes to make it official but I can't rule that out for the future."

The future seemed a black hole as she lay on gravel of #5 grade. The Mrsdm protruded like a metallic morel from the gravel some yards distant, its power source turned off so that its paddle-shaped tunnelers did not keep them awake with their glow. She and Moley agreed to keep their days and nights timed as regular as if she worked at Funkytown, though she received the impression that Moley could handle being a night owl. She herself relied on her Samsung's internal clock to chingwheep intervals to eat and sleep. Who says a smartphone is nothing without the internet?

The original entrance to Howe lay hundreds of yards to the north beyond the anteroom to the quarry where they had camped. The remade hole's small circumference proved a challenge for Moley to squeeze through when they had ranged Thursday evening and today, too, because Friday
was Oyá's special day. Throughout the expanse, caving with him excited her sense of exploration, and nobody was better at protecting the both of them from unstable footing or razor sharp crystalline outgrowths in the originally discovered caverns beyond the caverns currently open to the public. She directed Moley to camp in the less scenic quarry anteroom, though, with the originally discovered caverns a buffer between the noise of the mecha and any tourist's hearing. They had explored all morning and napped easily together after a simple lunch.

The future looked less scary than back in January's eviction, but still formidable. Frances felt unsettled at a mother's natural question of her daughter. "I've changed my mind about that issue since I met him. It's hard to explain. My life has been jumbled since you left and he's my anchor, along with Santeria and Funkytown, oh you don't know about that, do you."

Frances basked in the warmth of an unseen smile. "You don't need to explain to me, dear. I can see you are healthy outside and in. That's enough for a parent."

As when Frances was six years old and made progress at the ballet barre, her mother's praise warmed her. "Mom, I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you. You asked me what is this about, what did you mean? Did Oyá summon you from the grave to help me? I'm doing better than at the new year, I can tell you." But wasn't the orichas' power limited underground like her smartphone's, oh wait Oyá used wind to display her power and there was no wind under the earth but Ogún lived underground like Pluto, gads, Frances, don't sprinkle Roman mythology into this spiritual stew -

The loved voice toughened. "I raised you to stay afloat no matter what. You have. That doesn't mean I haven't missed you too, darling, and that I won't treasure this memory when I return to my rest."

Frances spoke her heart. "Don't go yet, please, Mom."

"I have a limited time. It's the same for all of us." The smell of Wind Song thinned and Frances rushed to get out the necessary words, words that she'd not realized she meant to utter.

"Mom, I'm stressed and before you say join the club, I want, um, would like to have your advice on just, well, life in general. It was a horrible shock to be fired, and and could you, um, smooth the waters a little? Like you used to?"

The voice turned dispassionate, and Frances wondered how much of her mother truly remained. Her final illness had seemed to blot out much of her psyche, along with memories of her past. The next words eased Frances' fears; her mother merely analyzed while she came on from strength as she had in life. "It's not because you're afraid of living, is it, dear? You've got a good head on your shoulders underneath that strange colored hair."

Afraid? No, that wasn't it. However, she was more cautious about serious decisions that could erode her bank account. She had tasted destitution and didn't like it. "I don't think I'm afraid. Keeping afloat took a toll after I was fired, though. Will you tell my future?" The voice in Frances' head was Frances' own now and spoke clearly. *Frances, Miss Cleo was a talented reader of people, their future, and the tarot. You are not Miss Cleo where it counts. Wearing a turban that matches your caftan and speaking Jamaican patois is your limit unless you call on the orichas.*

"No."

Well, Mom could be blunt in life, too. "Oh."

Hold on, her mother fit into a certain hierarchy that really, Frances ought to have thought of before she asked the question. "Can you?"
"No. So why Santeria?"

Ahah, uncomfortable topic switch just like always, Mom. Some things never change. Frances thought a moment before prodding out the words. "It's a faith that lights up my life, Mom, and you'd recognize a lot of the orichas, the, the higher powers in it, I mean, like Oyá, she's the one who's closest to me and kind of like Saint Brigid, and and and the warriors like Ogún who sort of blends with Saint Peter - "

Was that an impatient sniff she heard? "Speak simply, Frances, you never used to babble. I've met Ogún. He chatted up Saint Peter to allow me to visit you. Saint Peter sends greetings and Ogún says to tell you - what's the matter?"

Frances couldn't respond. One world at a time, her Yale literature professor's words came to her, Thoreau on his deathbed said that one world at a time is the way to think and for only the second instance, she doubted her faith could sustain her when science remained clean and simple. Was it possible to toss away faith to return to hard scientific principles that she had used to construct biomechanical androids, she wondered, and what would the cost be to her soul? She became dizzy.

So there were unseen worlds that combined and blended like Ogun and Saint Peter, and her own mother had traveled between them, had stood in the presence of a saint and an oricha - and Mom kept most of her personality even in the bowels of the earth well okay the spirits of the dead did that in every faith she'd ever heard of - the next thing you know she'd be asking about her china hutch and her gimcrack collections -

The earth moved beneath Frances and she fainted.

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Frances awoke alone with tears on her cheeks. She hadn't had a chance to ask if Mom needed anything done for her on this side of the veil.

The scent of Wind Song had dissipated, but stayed on her mind.

Team Rocket was split in two, because Moley no longer warmed her back.

She switched on the Maglite to see a traveling altar not four feet in front of her, her open travel bag beside it. She sat tailor fashion in front of the gathering of objects, still dazed from a visit from the Great Beyond. Ogún and Oshosi deserved her attention. They deserved what she would give them after she calmed.

Thought-feelings were all that was left. When had she set up the altar and summoned her warriors? Merely talk about them with Mom did not bring them, so at some point she must have chanted a moyugbar, saluted Olorun The Almighty Father and then the spirits of her dear personal departed before progressing to invite one or more of the orichas. An oricha did mount her, but which one had it been?

Regrets over not having more time with Mom swamped her before she forged ahead into resolve to do what she needed to do next. She gathered her strength to wrest another proper invocation from the circumstances, and soon she calmed enough to set forth spiritually. She was set on her task as she knelt on the blanket and didn't hear Moley's approach, the stinker.

"Frawnces."

"M-Moley?"
He squatted by her, offering her a mushroom and then brushing off salty tear tracks. "Whash the matter?"

"N-Nothin'. I guess the deep caverns made me feel deeper. It's time for me to call upon Oshosi and, and Ogún. My warriors, yes, but not Eleggúa, at least not after the beginning, and I'm not proficient enough to deal with Osun." She fingered the mushroom's cap, not eating it just yet.

"More than already did?"

This startled her. "What do you mean?"

Moley aped whirling an iruke. "And Frawnces jumped and rolled."

"I see." She could handle this. An oricha must have taken her over for a longer time as never before, but it couldn't have been Oyá. Never would an oricha allow Santería happenings without first acknowledging Olorun and then Frances' personal dear departed spirits before acting like an oricha, so really, there wasn't a whole lot to do other than offer specialized thanks. Still, she wanted to conduct the thanks in the correct order by beginning the ceremony over again, because she wanted to do it when she was in her own mind. "Yes, more than that." She nibbled the mushroom to get energy, then popped the whole thing into her mouth. "Gud stuf."

"If Frawnces says so, it must be so. Why more warriors?"

She owed him for carting her here, and for so much more. She bustled in her travel bag past some sox to extract her briefcase, the one gifted by Mom when Frances got her job as zookeeper. "Because I need to thank them in Santería for my life, for letting me visit with Mom, for Dexter and his family who became friends outside of Santería, for Funkytown, for my new home and yes, for you. Don't tell me that we aren't important to each other."

Moley made a face she had never seen before. "Frawnces not bring animal to kill, why?"

"No, Godmother Felicity said a sacrifice wasn't necessary for this ebó." She gestured to the offerings in front of them.

"Cmloops, Frawnces." He pecked her cheek.

"Hush and hold the Maglite." By the strong light, Frances arranged her briefcase's content: candles and a lighter, an airline-sized bottle of red wine, a small drum, a broom, a glittery piece of iron pyrite for Ogún, the iruke for Oyá, Eleggúa would be pleased by a hutia meat patty wrapped in plastic and Osun generally nibbled a bit of meat, too, and for Oshosi, a generous baggie of Hoppin' John that Godmother Felicity contributed. Felicity certainly knew the best exotic shops to buy hutia and cowpeas for making the two delicious recipes and had promised Frances to teach her how to prepare them in a cramped underground kitchen. Would Moley enjoy with her the edible offerings once the ceremony concluded? Would it be all right with the orichas, since technically the ceremony would be over with and the fact that Moley was not of Santería inconsequential? She hoped so; she trusted the kindness of her faith. "Now keep quiet, Moley."

He petted the white frosted tips of hair above her left ear and rumbled subsonically. Good grief, why was she near tears again at the sound? Mom's visit had shaken her to her roots. Peace, peace, peace, Oyá grant me kincamaché, she breathed.

Frances analyzed her clothing. Barefoot, all right, but she needed her bracelets, eleke, and nine-banded skirt to please Oyá even in her absence. She could pull the skirt on over her jeans and fished it out of her travel bag, to Moley's penetrating gaze. Funny, it felt right to dress in front of him and as
she shrugged into her eleke, one of its stones caught on her hair. Moley detached it for her, rubbing her neck as he settled the necklace into place. She shivered a little at the touch. After slipping on her nine copper bracelets and clearing her mind, she knelt and began.

As an aboricha or medio asentado, Frances held the right to summon and be mounted; she did not desire to be mounted at this time. With an open heart and both hands spread to show her ashe, she lit candles and began a moyugbar, drumming and humming. Kneeling beside her, Moley growled accompaniment and when she turned to him, amazed, his little eyes twinkled as his voice slid up and down the scale. He ranged both above and below her hearing as he prodded her to continue. Just like that, her thanksgiving to the orichas turned to a guemilere, a party for them. She halted drumming, still humming along with Moley, and whisked the broom over her body to brush off negative energy. With a wink at her friend, she resumed drumming. He winked back.

Frances drummed faster.
"Well, shitooskey."

"So this is K'walski's idea of 'undiscovered caverns to explore while you two, um, take your relationship on a romantic vacation'?" Private kicked at the wood of a rotted out boat as he and his leader stood beside the stream, claws sinking into mud. Rusty pipes lined the jumbled rock walkway six feet above their heads. The walkway had been obviously constructed by humans of like-sized boulders the dimensions of bowling balls, but with a portion chiseled off to supply a flat surface. The whole effect was of murmuring cave waters that promised a touch of excitement in more vigorous torrents farther down the stream. Skipper couldn't tell his love's expression in the Maglite's beam because Private turned his face away in a pout as he crossed his flippers. "Wot's next? Disco balls and Dance Dance Revolution around the next corner, hmmm?"

Skipper hunched over the fragment of boat. "He had only Mason's translations of Phil's signs from the all-knowing internet." He poked into the wood and tasted muddy residue on a flippertip. "Tastes old, like centuries." He tasted more and then spat. "One century, anyway."

"Could the internet have been wrong, Skippa?"

"Don't let Kowalski, Phil or Mason hear you say that. The concept would blow their little minds."

Skipper pointed to drifts of driftwood higher up on the bank than where the two birds stood. "Look, wood for a fire. That's unexpected."

Private patted the Hello Kitty backpack's side at his waist where devices to light fires both physical and metaphorical lurked in dry safety. "I packed matches. I checked and double checked before we left." Now Skipper saw the non-pouty expression return when Private turned to him, his jaw dropping. "Wait! If there's wood in here" - he gestured to the level where the driftwood formed a solid line extending out of their sight - "how did it get here?"

"Flood." Skipper shrugged. "This place probably floods in winter."

"All the way to the ceilin'?" Private swallowed hard. "Do you think it'll flood while we're in it?"

"Protectprotectprotect. "No, since it'll be spring in a few days. It's not rained lately here or in New York City. Gil Force would have broadcast it." Skipper thought of more reassuring words to ease a worried brow. "And we trust Gil, don't we?"

The brow still furrowed. "Suppose the telly was wrong, like the internet was about 'glorious undiscovered caverns to explore'?"

"Then we'll die."

"Wot?"

Bravado had its place and Skipper knew well how to deploy it. "Just kidding, Private! Look, we go with what we know and improvise later, like every other commando does. Fly by the seat of our pants, though we can't fly and wear no pants on our delightful rumps." He slapped Private's butt. "Snap out of it, you're jinxing the mood."

"All, all righty roo. Yeah, I'd not do that for worlds and worlds." His smile trembled upon a winsome beak and Skipper huffed in anticipation of kissing it. He looked up.
"Beauty surrounds us, so let's get cracking at enjoying it. This is a good place to start, now that we're out of human hearing." The so-called dam door Phil had described on Howe Caverns website's brochure proved easy-peasy to karate open and heave shut. The human world of tours and tourists got left behind, good riddance, and all that was left was Mama Nature. Skipper plowed forward into squeezing the life out of these precious vacation days. For half an hour, the Maglite shone splendidly into the long-closed portions of Howe Caverns as they swam, waded, and waddled further away from the door.

Kowalski would have called these formations by proper scientific names.

Early on a Friday, Skipper improvised. "Flowy, Jaggedy, Sparkly Enough For Ringtail, Something Sticky, Looks Like A Juicebox Straw, and Stabby." He ran a flipper over the fluid collecting on a stalagmite's tip. "This one's a Sticky, Private." He sniffed and then tasted the fluid. "Smells like sulphur, pee yew, tastes worse, ptooey. I'm naming this one Stinky instead."

"Thanks for the warnin'." Private clambered over a dark lump three steps ahead of his commander. He shone the Maglite upwards. "Quite lovely up there, out of our reach."

Two little penguins admired the view of toothy stalactites twenty feet above their heads. Private could see that a lesson formed in Skipper's head and he hoped that he shaped it into an observation. No need for formality down here. Sure enough, the statement turned out quite mild. "It's best many times when we can't reach beauty because we could spoil it. I think St. Urho said that first, but I could be wrong. It's his day today."

"Righto, and beauty is ever so relaxin' to see, innit?" Private eyed Skipper's pose meaningfully: no frown of concentration, no flippers akimbo, no jutted chin, just no nothing. It almost didn't look like him.

Skipper noticed the appraisal. "You're right on all counts, Private."

Crikey, no correction or argument, either. The times indeed were a-changin' in these caverns. Private waded once more into the stream and splashed playfully. "Join me?"

From up ahead came a louder sound of waters rushing over themselves in an effort to outrace gravity. Skipper nodded and plunged into the stream, where he floated on his back beside him. The two skimmed leisurely with only a smaller amount of extra strength needed to swim in these fresh waters, feeling as light as, well, birds, while the waters carried them along to romance. Private's shiver of anticipation had nothing to do with the chill waters. Thanking Hello Kitty's manufacturers and all things Japanese, Private's shriek came as a surprise to himself as well as to Skipper.

"Bats! Look!"

"Where away?"

"Twelve o'clock high! There!"

Dark shapes rustled as the Maglite hit them twenty feet up. Nestled into nooks strewn throughout the stalactites, little bitty shapes stirred yet did not fly.

"Stormin' Norman's sock garters, Kowalski didn't say anything about bats, either! Are Rico's mad love skills messing up our team's brainy guy?" Private thought that Skipper wouldn't want him to notice that blurted assessment, so he bypassed it.

Private pinwheeled his flippers to stay in place. "Yoohoo! Bats! Oh, ba-aaats! We're just passin' through, no worries, we'll be moseyin' straightaway - "
"They're - hibernating? That must be it." The bats hitched a leathery wing over their faces and did the batty equivalent of grumbling in soft squeaks. Skipper switched off the Maglite. "We'll leave them alone if they leave us alone."

Private hooked a leg through Skipper's to keep together in pitch black as they drifted out of sight of the iconic cave creatures. "All sorts of new things on our vacation, right, Skippa?" He shook the quivers out of his voice. "It's wot we were comin' here for, yes, honey?"

"Something like that, babe."

Peace descended as they passed through vaults of plated gypsum that glinted like real disco balls as they turned the Maglite on again. Stalactites, flowstone, draperies, soda straws, cave pearls, and columns greeted them in stunning sequences. Silently, the splendor of the underground spaces awed them into a placid state.

Uncountable time sped by until Private discovered unknown restlessness that he put down to what Kowalski would call his id. Upon seeing Skipper and himself reflected as tiny black and white prisms gliding along the ceiling, he flashed onto a mystic vision of their lovemaking using the dildo that later he would term *you're a right nutter, you are, Private. He had* to act.

"I call breath holdin' contest!"

"Aw, you always win that one - hey, wait for me!"

Two little penguins dove to the stream's bottom, actually not all that deep in contrary to what torrents they thought they had heard back by the dam door. They puttered about and tried to spot any examples of weird, eyeless fish that inhabited cave streams, when a rumble rocked their world. The waterproof Maglite bobbled in Skipper's grip as a fissure opened in the streambed. Displaced water swirled beneath them like a bathtub drain and they sank out of each other's sight.
Chapter 43

Skipper dropped the Maglite. Swirling ever deeper into unknown chasms as he went limp to follow Routine Seventeen: Just Relax And Take It You Fool, he saw the light dim as the device sank faster than he did. Cursing only in his mind, he dove after it to substitute Routine Seventeen for Routine Eighty-One: Hellyeah action and didn't stop until it rested once more in his flipper. The waters stabilized as if someone had plugged the drain and he paddled to slow his momentum. He swept the light in 360 degrees. No bottom showing, no sides, and only the innate penguin sense of direction told him which way was up. When the grit in the water settled a bit more, the glittery effect resembled beaming in that ancient TV show that Kowalski liked: Star Trek. The skipper of the Enterprise showed penguin determination and Skipper had warmed to him, never mind that the human also was a honey-baked holiday ham. The grit thinned, Skipper evaluated his sitch and clutched the Maglite tighter. There was no hope and also no despair, so first things first.

Private. Where was Private?

Private struggled against the sucking whirlpool until he realized he was wasting his strength. Routine Seventeen, he thought, Routine Seventeen. Without further spending of oxygen, he allowed himself to drift. Remarkably, the waters reached an equilibrium, a stasis as they deposited him untold feet beneath the surface. No crystalline walls scratched him, no gritty bottom scraped his soles. Suspended and still conscious, he looked around. His faith in the goodness of the universe swelled as he beheld a disk of pure white.

There he was! Skipper swam close to his love and as he touched the smaller bird's gentle flipper, hope returned. He gestured with the Maglite to where his senses said up.

Private squeezed Skipper's flipper as the two set out for the surface.

Pressure enveloped them, bubbles swirled about them and they rose. How and why the caverns shifted solidity remained on Skipper's battle mind until his lungs semaphored distress. By Vidkun Quisling, would their bodies betray them? After shining the light upwards to spy no gypsum or calcite ceiling, he decided that they might run out of oxygen before surfacing. Damn, damn, double damn, triple damn, hell. Even commandos needed oxygen and their limit was eighteen minutes underwater. How long had they catapulted downwards?

Calm was the order of the day because they needed to remember Circular Throat Singing to ensure survival, but, but - no. Oh no. There wasn't yet a routine assigned to it and thus no silent signal. Panic blazed before Skipper tamped it down. Circle? Throat? Easy peasy to make a signal off the cuff! Still paddling, he seized Private's shoulder.

Private jolted at the expression on his love's face. A stern fire in his eyes, the bird looked like the whole world revolved around communication of something or other. Wait, was Skipper choking? Would he be forced to witness a wheezing, drowning death of someone he loved? Did he save Skipper's life at Kastelholm for nothing? Life couldn't be so mean! Skipper propelled himself still upward with steadily stroking feet, but now he sketched a circle and pointed to his throat, again and again. Crikey, why wasn't Kowalski here, Kowalski with the big brain that understood concepts his
puny brain proved muddy at - wait. Wait. Kowalski and the throat singing lesson! Precious minutes added to underwater survival! Private nodded.

IOIOIOIOIO

Skipper said to himself *boo hoo in relief later, commander crybaby* when realizing that Private understood the makeshift signal. Still holding the Maglite as well as Private's gaze, he squeezed his diaphragm to force air in his lungs upward to beak and earhole passages. A fierce earache began, which he ignored. What was the magic, since they received no new oxygen? Was the oxygen in their blood enough to keep conscious until they broke the surface to gasp like Private's prize fish? Paddle upward and think later, commando. Just keep swimming. If it's your turn to bellyflop into the Eternally Foggy Sea on your way to the Endless Iceberg, at least you'll have company.

IOIOIOIOIO

Private forced his diaphragm into an igloo shaped dome by effort of will, fighting the urge to press on it with both flippers. He needed his flippers to swim as hard as he ever had, upward to where faith said the air was. There couldn't have been a full second between beginning the technique and realizing why it made him feel better. Oxygen molecruel thingies remained in his bloody bloodstream to feed his muscles and what circular throat singing did was belay panic, because with air in his beak and in - ouch - his earhole passages, he felt as if he had no need to breathe. Yes, the morale officer in him said that if neither of them felt panic because they feared nothing remained to feed their lungs from an empty airway, then they wouldn't gasp to inhale water. If they still kept paddling upwards and lasted until they broke surface, then everything would be right as rainbows.

And so it was when they reached the surface three point seven nine minutes later.

IOIOIOIOIO
Chapter 44

Skipper slapped Private. "Br-Breathe - like me!"

Private continued heaving breaths as deep as the Marianas Trench until Skipper slapped him again. "L-Like me! Pant - like - Elmer when - he was - a puppy!"

"El-El-El-muh muh muh -"

"Do it!" Pouring all the command he could into his voice, he captured the cornflower blue gaze with his adamantine sapphire. "Now!"

Private's pupils dilated to onyx pools that should never reflect suffering of the body or heart if Skipper had anything to say about it. "R-Righto!"

They disciplined oxygen intake for ten minutes until the spots faded from their vision. Skipper played the Maglite up, down, and around. They sprawled on their backs on a gravel beach like others they'd seen throughout Howe Caverns.

"Unship the GPS, Private, and we'll see where we landed."

"Aye." Out came the smartphone, protected from its dunking by Japanese tech. Skipper indicated to Private to start the gizmo's operation. The device powered up to display the time of day and a few mysterious lighted blips, but nothing else started: no smartapple female voice, no arrows, nothing.

Private hit the number five key again and again. "It's busted, Skippa."

Skipper shook the device, aimed a trademark scowl at it, and growled. Nothing. The Angry Words that followed Private pretended not to hear.

"K'walski did say GPS might develop a rash or the gollywobbles at times - "

"It's American knowhow and it let me down."

"Actually, I think it may be off its form because we're in a cave so it's - um. Wotever you say, Skippa."

"Never mind, it's another pile of shit to step over. I'll go commando, er I mean consult Mama Nature." Skipper asked his brain where they were, closed his eyes and received impressions of no deeper than before and farther east. Well. That was a relief beyond pure survival, because Kowalski's intel said three areas comprised Howe: the current happy turistas area with its elevator and spiffy building including gift shop and thimbles, the 'undiscovered area' beyond the damn dam door that turned out to be the abandoned former happy turistas area, and the quarry that really was abandoned. The quarry opened to a hillside through the original original opening from back in 1842.

"Wot a spin on the wheel of fortune, Skippa."

"So help me Pat and Vanna, that was a close call, babe. We've never had closer."

"Worse than when Manfredi and Johnson bought it in the tsunami, yeah. At least then K'walski and Rico maybe could have found our floatin' corpses, that is if they themselves didn't croak - "

"Private."
"Mmm?"

"Moodbuster."

"Oh. Yes. Well then. Light a fire, shall we?" Private probably knew his suggestion was, well, suggestive, but that was all right with his commander.

"A splendid idea." Skipper passed the Maglite to Private as he slipped off the Hello Kitty backpack from his own shoulders. Poking around the bottom, he discovered matches as well as one of Private's surprises for him. "What's this?"

Wrapped in aluminum foil and giving off a heavenly stench, the single perfect sardine could mean only one thing. "You're wooing me, aren't you."

Private tapped the tips of his flippers together. "Is it workin'?"

"It is."

Private beamed. "Then you'll love this next bit." With a 'pardon me' look, he extracted a collapsible mug from the side pocket of the backpack, filled it with water from the stream and tore open a packet of familiar looking brown powder with his beak. Performing like Ricky Jay at his best, Private misdirected, indicated the mug with an expansive flourish as he sprinkled powder into the water and then turned his back. Skipper's smile grew as a fart sound flowered not from Private's behind but from his front. He tidied up the backpack and resealed it.

"Presto change-o! Hot coffee!" Private crowed as he presented the mug to Skipper and then bowed. Skipper placed the sardine in its proper place and took a sip.

"You're a wonder, babe."

"Thank you, kind sir. You're quite amazin' yourself."

The atmosphere became steamy and not just from the steam arising from the mug. Skipper sat on a convenient stalagmite with a cup shaped top as he savored his favorite beverage. "Hmmm, how did you get it so hot? The coffee, not yourself."

Private dug a toe into the gravel after tittering at the question. "K'walski said it's a one-timey thing usin' a broken glowstick and his secret Jiggles formula which makes the heat bigger, like."

Skipper would have spluttered if he hadn't just finished his coffee. "Good redeye gravy, will we be fighting Jigglei down here? And with no backup? Private!" He sat down the mug.

"You're cute when you're mad, honey. No, the one-timey hot flash fizzles to nothin' when it's through, see?" He indicated the mug, where absolutely nothing was going on.

"Tell that to my heart when it stops racing."

"I like your heart that way." Private turned to gathering sticks, snapping long ones to neat lengths, the darling. Skipper threw off gloom and doom while allowing the swell of good feelings to buoy his mood. He supposed he wore a bashful expression that Private couldn't see anyway. Damn, he was looking forward to whatever happened next.

"You relax, Skippa, I'll make the fire."

"All right. Let the good times roll." A drip of fluid hit Skipper square in the eye. He wiped off the
wet, feeling the mineral water's tackiness on his flippertip as he sucked it.

Private giggled as he collected firewood. "K'walski said the River Sticks fed into the lake we passed, how clever!" He roamed farther downstream and got close to getting out of earshot before commenting, "I wonder how Phil knew to sign where there were sticks?"

Skipper concentrated on practicalities as he searched the best spot for a cozy fire. "It's drier over here, Private - whoa!" White crystal shards the size of bowling pins dropped from above to pierce the gravel not one foot away from his foot. He could have sworn he heard Trinidadian drums followed by a warning that he felt through his gut, which never let him down. "Private! Evasive!"

Dodging spears of calcite and gouts of mineral water, the two birds kept their footing through ground tremors with a penguin's natural sense of balance. A rectangle bigger than Alice's zoo cart thrust through the water, foaming it to resemble Tide detergent on laundry day.

"Skippa!" The blocky thing looked familiar as it loomed above their heads. They scrambled ten feet away from the disturbance.

"What fresh madness is this?" cried Skipper. The blunt spear was the tunneler mecha, the same one that tore through Hallett Reserve forest loam on Kidsmas Eve, only this time it surged through watery gravel until its tip reached eight feet high, not counting the ten feet long blades. It quivered as steam hissed from its rotating blades even after they stopped turning and glowing. Water drained through the gravel, making patterns that Kowalski would term Escheresque. A depth of perhaps three inches slopped around the base of the mecha.

A hatch opened as the two birds took up battle stance.

"Zombie Apocalypse, Private! Routine Seventy-One!" shouted Skipper as a hunched over man and a blonde woman stumbled down the ramp. "Not Frances Alberta, the other one!"
Chapter 45

The two humans appeared oblivious to anyone but themselves as strong lights from the mecha lit the caverns. A universal joint where the ramp telescoped out from the chassis ensured that the ramp leveled to any surface where its end finally rested; the whole effect was dizzying, and tracking Francis Alberta and her companion made Private and Skipper slew their heads to the right. After the jolting earth slippage preceded their near drowning, their sense of balance glitched. Skipper heard Private stumble and then adjust his footing, thank the Endless Iceberg; he dared not risk a glance behind him to check.

Skipper studied their sitrep as he awaited developments. The lights jutting from the squat horizontal lines of the mecha's smaller dimension resembled laser swords, which was uncanny. How did they do it? Wait, wait, didn't Kowalski and his twenty-four views of Star Wars and its fanlore contribute to a general ordnance meeting one time last year, way before Fasta Island, saying that lightsabers operated in a loop with magnetism or other geeky science to compress the light into a cylinder, no, hold on, that was Hippie Theory 101 and Kowalski was many things, but a hippie he was not, just ask Doris -

Skipper considered the big picture as he compared the housings emitting the laser swords to two of Marlene's nipples while the two non-penguins swayed at the bottom of the ramp until regaining their balance. The man stood with widely planted bare feet the size of Tony Hawks' smallest Birdhouse skateboard and Frances Alberta leaned heavily on the chassis.

"Frawnces get it right next time." Skipper noticed that the man's raspy voice appeared to strengthen Frances Alberta. She drew herself up after clearing her throat.

"Ogún help me, that was the wildest ride I've ever given anyone and it's no excuse that we got loopy dancing the boogaloo at the guemilere." She fingered a blonde strand dangling down her forehead. "Not to mention the drumming we aced." She smiled impishly. "I still don't know how my hair returned to its natural color. Was that some kingly magic you worked on me?"

There were lacings of humor in the reply that Skipper heard but did not understand. What was going on between these two? "If Frawnces says so, it must be so."

"Someday I'll figure you out, Moley, but that day is not today." She rolled her shoulders with a wince. "Umph, driving the Mrsdm takes lots of strength and I used up mine frugging the night away with you."

The strange man covered his yawn with a palm that two members of the team could have stood upon. "Fun." He lay in a fetal curl on the ramp with a sigh and then patted the space beside him while wiggling his toes.

"Not here, m'man. You're tough as an aye-aye's fingernails, but I want a bed softer than the gravel we've been sleeping on. Let's level out the Mrsdm and get some rest inside." The driver or pilot or whatever he was grunted before doing a nip up with coiled strength that Skipper admired. The man rose from his squat to rub at his back. "Sorry to bounce you around inside the cabin, Moley. I lost my driving reflexes since I've not owned a car in two years."

The one called Moley passed his hand in front of his eyes. He looked straight at the two birds and rubbed his temples. "I see dead ytl." "What's that mean? I can't see anyth- " Then Skipper saw that she spotted them. She gasped. "Where
are we?" She swiveled her head around the quarry's expanse. In the forty-foot diameter halo generated by the mecha's powerful lights, their drama unfolded as if on a stage. "We're still at Howe, but penguins, how, how - "

"Frawnces dizzy." Moley cupped her elbow, but Frances shrugged him off.

"Penguins down here, how can it be - wait, the one penguin, that brawny body shape, he's, he's, I know him - "

Skipper and Private remained at battle position, attention focused laser-like on their old enemy. The stasis appeared to unnerve Frances.

"He's the one - what - I can't even - you drank more red wine than me - " She made to step off the ramp as Moley detained her.

"Frawnces careful."

"It looks shallow, the water won't slop over my boots, I'll be all right - "

"Gravel maybe have sinkholes now. Frawnces not penguin."

She plucked his hand from her upper arm. "They're only animals, Moley, so whatever reason the orichas brought us together must be important - "

"Whash?"

Skipper realized anew that the man smelled mostly human; it was the inhuman part that worried him. What if the man could, could - there wasn't enough paranoia in the world to explain this - Skipper wished that Private were not here. These were deeper waters than they had planned to vacation in.

"Don't make me kick you to the curb again, lady." Of course, she wouldn't understand animal speech but it was imperative not to give ground, even underground. Skipper heard Private growl from three steps behind him, a startling anomaly in his love.

"Skippa, take care! They are bendin' light and who knows wot else they can do!" Until he turned to make eye contact, Skipper did not realize that he was so attuned to his love that he shivered in time with him at this astounding news. He turned back around and looked closer.

It was true; the topside lights from the mecha appeared bright enough to be lasers and as they hit the drips falling that were thick enough to be called a curtain, the beams looked like they bent like melting candle wax, seeming to follow the flow down to the ground where they splattered out of existence.

"Mystical," Skipper muttered. The word sprang to his beak from an unknown source and he repeated it. "Mystical. Private, we're in for I don't know what. Stay frosty."

Private whispered, "We could use Routine Fifty-Three right about now."

Routine Fifty-Three comprised one irreplaceable element: Rico. The routine's full name was Rico Does Something Crazy. "Yeah," whispered Skipper back. "Yeah."

"All right, you two, what are you doing here?" Frances Alberta's voice started out levelly enough. "I'm not a zookeeper anymore, thanks to you scamps."

"Frawnces?"
"That's correct, Moley. The big one messed me up but good."

Skipper heard placating tones next. "Frawnces mad. Calm down, drzhp."

"Has anybody in the history of the world, underground, above ground, or stratospheric outer space ever calmed down when someone said calm down?" Uh oh, not good. Not good at all.

Skipper had dealt with tantrums from both females and males and he realized that Frances Alberta neared a meltdown. "Private -"

"I know, Skippa. I know. She's buildin' up steam. I'm ready for wotever comes next."

Private and Skipper braced themselves when Frances Alberta smacked away Moley's ample hands and began to scream.
Chapter 46

Frances blew her stack. "Yeeeeeurrgh! Eeeeeeuhahwwww!" Maybe she didn't bring a framboyán seedpod to rattle to summon Oyá. Maybe Oyá wouldn't help her down here, or couldn't. It didn't matter, because some oricha would help her and she must be ready to be mounted. She jerked the iruke from her belt, rattled her eleke and bracelets, and looked fierce as she whipped the iruke over her head.

"EeeEEEeeeeeEEE!" Ululation came so naturally to her that Godmother Felicity had been shocked at her aptitude. "Oooooleooooooleooooooleoooooo!

Frances' nine skirts flared as she took a running jump from the ramp into the water to confront the birds. She would have made it if her companion hadn't done a handstand at her feet before arching his legs backwards like a bat catching a gnat in the flap of skin between its legs. The momentum of his acrobatic roll carried them both to the corrugated floor of the ramp in a heap. To Frances' heightened emotions, he erred in blocking her wishes.

She saw red.

"Get the hell off me!"

"Froppli!" Moley shouted back into the cabin and the glow returned to their mecha, although the blades remained still.

She became angrier. Her mind skittered on the image of a baboon's butt cheeks turning redder and redder with rage; animals had the advantage over humans at times, because all she could convey rage with were hateful words.

"Gawdammit, Moley! You don't know how he - this is the penguin I've told you about - "

"Frawnces hultm! Exceedingly!" Maybe, just maybe, she'd laugh years from now at his choice of words and the way his thick thighs grabbed her waist as he captured her. As she thrashed beneath him, they slid down the foot of the ramp where water soaked her hair and collar. Moley grappled her expertly onto her back to straddle her and their combined weight slid the two of them farther down towards the water.

The Mrsdm idled with halted blades as reverberations traversed Howe Caverns' outermost reaches, which was the anteroom to the outside quarry that lay thirty feet beyond. The disordered space, filled with abandoned iron mining implements, lay to the south of the current opening to the hillside that had replaced the original original opening when Howe ceded control to quarry operators. The sheen of protective power that coated the mecha's chassis and tunneling blades flared intermittently at one particular spot on one particular blade, the one she had banged against an underground iron deposit in her wild driving spree. Great Olorun, how much more serious this was than a fenderbender on Fifth Avenue! She might have damaged a complicated mecha and trapped the two of them. At least she and Moley could climb somehow to the opening and escape that way.

All these details swam together in Frances' distraught mind as she lay flat on her back underneath a king. She relived in her mind's eye the exploration that she accomplished after arriving on Thursday: while Moley watched her on the Mrsdm's ramp from the bottom of the quarry 172 feet below the hilltop, she rockclimbed twenty feet up to the innie belly-button in the sheer cliff. The innie was what was left of the original original 1842 opening that Farmer Howe's cows had discovered. Once in the innie, she traversed a narrow tunnel the length of a Winnebago until the caverns opened into what
brochures called the 'undiscovered area' but what actually was the original caverns opened to the 1842 public. Frances had done her homework before coming here. Nowadays, they were unconditioned caverns the length of seven football fields that quarrymen left in disarray since abandonment in 1976. After returning to the opening's lip, she shouted, "Bring the Mrsdm inside fifty feet from where I stand and then surface! We'll camp where it's sheltered!"

Moley did.

This area of her mind formed the calm, rational oasis that observed the opening now twenty feet up and twenty-five feet off from where she sprawled.

Say, what time of day was it, anyhow? If she looked to the opening, she ought to see daylight filtering through the thirty feet of tunnel -

She pinched that questioning thread of calm reason to nothing.

This feeling overwhelming her was anti-reason.

This feeling demanded expression.

Frances Alberta screamed again, nothing coherent, not even a moyugbar. Pure unformed feelings that were not thought-feelings, but inchoate things flooded her being. Without knowing which oricha would possess her, she tried to shape the power which would possess her body with the intentions of her mind.

"Oshosi! Great Hunter!" she cried. "You bring justice, you right wrongs, hear me! This creature of Yemayá wronged me and deserves punishment." She threw her head back and her arms wide in supplication. "Ogún, I call on your name to help me in your domain! When you were human, you disappeared into the depths of the earth rather than dying, so hear me now!" Pinioned as she was, she had to strain her neck to see the penguins.

The birds fifteen feet away did not act like regular birds. They looked vigilant, as if they understood her last sentence. If birds could have expressions, both the bigger one and its mate rolled their eyes at her words. Birds usually tried to get away from humans, and there were plenty of opportunities to splash around the tunneler or waddle up the bank to slip under the blades and escape in that fashion. No, they acted like the police, all ready for action, or something. Strange.

Moley scrambled up from her twisting body, a look she had never seen on his face. He hoisted her to her feet, giving her a little shake. "Frawnces, calm down."

"I won't and you can't make me!" Frances did not recognize the voice that shook with fury. "Orichas, come to my aid and strike down this bird!" She clutched at straws as not one oricha mounted her. "Ogún, see the iron tools here that you love!" Ahah, it would be nice to mention Osun, even if Osun did not mount people. She must take care not to confuse Osun with Ochún. "Osun! I honor you even if you do not mount me! Ochún, taste the waters of this stream to nourish you! Chango, the hmdo explodes just the way you like it! Orichas, lend me your power now!"

Moley and the penguins stared at her. Nothing happened.

Frances took hold of herself. She felt shame. Of course, Eleggua deserved propitiation first before any other oricha because he opened the gateway between worlds. In a chastened voice, she uttered the appropriate prayer. "Echu obá loná tosí gbogbo ona iré o aché."

Stuff got real.
Frances' heart sped from zero to sixty miles per hour in three seconds. The meek prayer to seek Eleggua's aid fled her head as all her senses became one in a gravitational singularity: she saw how the energy protecting the hmdo from touching water thinned or maybe shorted out on a breadbox-sized space where it coated one blade, she heard Moley's untranslated mutterings that probably meant *calm down, woman*, she smelled what might be lubricant smoking from the troublesome paddle, she tasted a foul belch from their meal of hutia and red wine, and she felt Moley harden against her tailbone. Added to these was a sixth sense, that of a mystical event hovering just behind her. She tossed her head back to contemplate the ceiling silently because it was just her in her head, no oricha yet, although her faith did not waver that there would be, and soon.

Frances spied a drip from a stalactite twenty feet up make its way in slow motion towards the paddle. In her hyperaware state, the drip sparkled its way down through the laser lights, picking up speed and when it hit the leaf-shaped blade, displaced air and a *hmmfshpffpop* rocked her backward against Moley's chest. Purple puffs of reactive rubidium bubbled like soap suds and the resemblance to purple soan papdi was uncanny. Purple fumes billowed.

Frances felt only rage for revenge, not at all like what Godmother Felicity would have approved of. This rage was unrelated to Santeria's philosophy of multiple feelings blooming side by side in the rain forest of life, because the feeling burned incandescent and lonely. "You! Penguin! You ruined my life! I'll get you for that!"

Moley clasped his right wrist with his left hand about her waist. "Frawnces!"

"Stop, Moley! Let me go!"

The object of her fury danced backwards, looking uncertainly behind him. Oh ho, he protected the smaller bird? Frances heard penguin sounds from her nemesis and an answering *skrawk* from the other bird. She struggled against Moley's grip. He neither restrained her arms or her anger, but he remained rocklike while he steadied her on the ramp's incline. Her heightened senses applied to him, too, because she felt him harden further. Goodness, was this confrontation arousing him to such a degree?

Never mind. This was her revenge and she called on the orichas now that Eleggua did his part. "Oshosi, getting even and getting justice is your domain! Chango! You command lightning! Come to my aid in Ogún's realm! Blast these birds!" Orichas deserved a reason to display their strength, Godmother Felicity hinted many times. "I will sacrifice them both to you! Do this and let me rightly give respect! Hear me! Do it *now*! Get them!"

Watery drips came faster, undoubtedly jarred by the first explosion. The Mrsdm's corner laser beams tried to pierce the curtains of moisture only to bend down like wheat fields before a Nebraska tornado. *Popshzls* from water hitting rubidium infused in pollucite grew in frequency as Frances shrieked like Oyá. Within the ring of Moley's grasp, she jumped and flung her head and a sharp observer would say that she twerked against him. "Oyá, sit on my head, possess me *now*!"

The penguins backed off, still with flippers in attack position. For the sake of every heaven that existed, could Oyá grant Frances' demand for power even down here, where there was no wind for her to gather? Since she hadn't brought a seedpod to rattle to invoke Oyá, could that make a difference in tactics?

Frances hyperventilated. Wait, wait! Godmother Felicity hinted one time, with a surreptitious look
around, that eggun might work faster than an oricha because the eggun were spirits of the dead who once were alive. They would understand a living person's problems better and be *hotter and quicker to help*, not to mince words. The option served best in an emergency, and this situation qualified.

"Oyá! Bring out your dead!" Frances gasped out and before she thought it through, she called "Mom! Help me!" from the depths of her heart. Oyá would be the middleman of the deal and the dead would crush Frances' enemies, even the smaller penguin who had done her no harm personally - wait again. Something was not right.

How would Oyá deploy her army of the dead? W-Would Mom be drafted into that army? Did the orichas take prisoners? Did they *kill*? *Would Mom be ordered to kill? Would she do it to make her child happy? Could she live with herself afterwards?* Oh right, Mom was already dead, well ... could she exist in the afterlife as contented as she had sounded in her visit with her daughter, anyway?

Frances chilled to her core. Revenge never would be worth hurting her mother in any way, shape or form. Not even once. She came within a hair of calling everything off, of admitting she'd gone too far and begging forgiveness as a relative newcomer to Santeria, when the sense of slipping into a familiar, warm winter hoodie spread over her as it had at other times like these when orichas possessed her.

It was too late to quit now. Confused images played before her mind's eye: constructing the *Genderblender*, laughing with Dexter, clapping to the Dragon Dance at the the Festival of Awakening Insects From Hibernation to go along with the crowd, and lying on her memory foam mattress at home as she mused where this thing she had with Moley would take her eventually.

Frances tasered her brain for options as words joined the images to spin before coalescing. Kaiju? Where would kaiju take her? Kaiju *might* be her relationship to the penguins because of her huge size as compared to them. Another word popped up, mecha, mecha like the *Mrsdm*, which could smear them to red pulp, or even *Genderblender* because an Osterizer stylized into sculpture sort of resembled mecha. What about a lengthy, more *satisfying* fate for them? Finally an alternative to death-dealing swift destruction presented itself. She jammed the idea firmly into the Plan B slot, because Plan A was just too satisfying in the immediate future. She clung to both ideas and hoped to express them to whoever this oricha was before she passed into temporary oblivion.

She calmed a trifle as she prepared to faint into the unknown, but things were different this time.

How unheard of that her psyche did not fade with the possession but retained awareness of her actions.

How strange.

How delicious.

How much she owed Oyá! How could she show gratitude - wait, the iruke lay in the water some yards away. Frances made do with swirling her arms like Hurricane Maria over her head, jumping and screeching. Her howls echoed through the caverns and Moley might have muttered something against her ear, but she paid him no mind as she flexed her spiritual muscles. No, it wasn't Oyá or Ogún or Oshosi or Ochún possessing her, it was the fiercest, angriest oricha, it was, it was -

"Chango! Fry them! Change them into what pleases you!" She had in mind two fricasseed corpses if Chango unleashed his full power down here in Plan A.

She could live with that.
Santeria respected restraint as well as fervor, and so Santeria thwarted Frances Alberta's darker Plan A desires and substituted quirkier Plan B; Frances would speculate upon the results for years to come.

Upon jumping onto Moley's bare toes in her frenzy, he grunted and stumbled sideways against the Mrsdm, sending a tremor through the deceptively delicate paddle. A ceiling drip coincided with his movement, hit the paddle, and a spark flew outwards.

One little penguin crossed its path.

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In a split second, Frances visualized what Chango could do, but would he? She rose on her toes and shouted, "Chango obá adé oko, obá ina, Alafin Oyó aché o!"

The spark changed character into a ray, a death ray Frances hoped, as it did something very strange. It struck the waters rippling from the ceiling that warped the laser lights' emission. The ray flared upwards to exit the stream. After that, it was anyone's guess where it would land, because it ricocheted among the stalactites as it found one facet of the crystals after the other. Frances thought of a funhouse mirror she had played with at age eight because the reflection was not her true self at all, at least as much as a reflection could be true. She growled as a downward angled facet made it hit the black back not of the instigator of her Penguin Makeover but the smaller penguin.

An anguished animal cry split the darkness. Frances saw her nemesis hold his ground, wearing a distressed face, and she made to tear off after him to stomp him into oblivion. No matter that he possessed martial arts skills! No matter that she would never fathom how or why he and his friend wound up underground! He would be roadkill and she would be gratified. "I'll get you, my pretty, and your little friend, too!"

Moley's arms trapped her and her feet left the ground. "Moley! What are you doing! This is the penguin that ruined my life!" She kicked his ankles and bit what she could reach of the granite-like arm. He squeezed hard enough to make her see spots. "Let me go!"

Moley hauled her further up the telescoping ramp and grunted again when she delivered a reverse gorbals kiss, the back of her skull snapping into his face. With one arm he contained her, with the other he stabbed the hatch control just inside the coaming. As the ramp retracted and the hatch juddered its way closed, he scrambled into the Mrsdm with her still kicking his shins. "Bullt!" he roared in the direction of the controls and the mecha shuddered into action, reversing its course as it backed into the tunnel it had created minutes before.

"Aaaaggh! You had no right to do that! No right!" she screeched and stomped her boots as he set her down. He raised his hand and she flinched, but he was only swiping away blood from a split lip. The sight of red drips percolated through to Frances' psyche as Chango retreated.

"You - I - we - I didn't mean to hurt - I apologize - "

"Gzky!" he shouted to the controls and the angle of declension shifted to neutral so that Frances swayed on her feet in the impression of moving forward as the mecha leveled out. She could tell he was restraining any outbursts until their situation settled. She admired delayed gratification in any human or near-human as much as she admired immediate declaration of emotions. "Frawnces get red box." He pointed to the larger of two boxes.

She dug beneath the dash to retrieve a red box the same shade as his blood. The color of his blood resembled the dark strawberry shade of the box, a tinge away from fully human color. "Here, sit and I'll fix you up." He planted his twill trousers firmly in the driver seat and swiveled it to face her. She stepped between his spread thighs and went to work, not meeting his gaze.

She concentrated on swiping away blood with pledgets and daubed a white liquid onto the split.

He hissed, hurt and angry.

She dropped to her knees at his feet, intending to swipe the white liquid on the scratches, but he
gestured curtly to stop.

He clenched his fists.

She bent to replace the red box under the dash and flinched again when she saw where she had barked the tops of his feet and toes. She straightened up, unafraid.

He was her drzhp. He would not hurt her.

"Moley, I said I was sorry." The task complete, she crossed her arms and turned away. He stood and even though she was taller, she felt his kingly presence loom in the eleven by fourteen cabin until it pressed against her. This was his vehicle, he had carted her here at her insistence, and had walked into her life when everyone else had walked out of it. Had she messed up their friendship?

She could tell he was still upset because the question came through clenched teeth. "Frawnces lultm today. Why?"

She snorted, still cranky, still shaking. "If you mean madder than a wet blue hen, yes well I'll tell you why. That bird did a number on my whole life, Moley, with its Penguin Makeover." Her breath hitched. "I didn't want my life made over! I liked it as it was! But nooooo, it blew up my whole neat plan for a clean zoo and, and I got fired from a job I loved, and and - "

"Met me."

"Er, well yes, we'd never have met if - don't get your feelings hurt - "

"If Frawnces says so, it must be so."

"Now cut that out! I don't know everything - "

"Yphnk."

"Ozzlr."

"Frawnces know whash yphnk means?"

"I've been taking notes on your language. Yes, I understand that term."

"Oh, dbltm."

"Don't be rude." Moley withdrew his hand when Frances ducked back from an idle fondle of her blonde glory. "And stop petting me when I'm not in the mood."

"Frawnces spunky. I like."

Speaking of mood, somehow the mood shifted to Relationship Mode and Frances found she was ready to think of herself and Moley together-together. What a compelling future they would share, sort of like, um, like - well, she couldn't put a name on it. None of the animals in Hoboken Zoo had a similar one, at least in her experience. As for humans, maybe she and he would be the first to share an almost-human to human pairing, outside of fictional couples like Superman and Lois Lane?

On her first visit to his kingdom, she'd smiled and waved at his harem of six, which status seemed to require them draping themselves in gauzy veils. They had spoken no English, smiled readily enough, and deferred to Moley in a fashion she had never observed in her friends who were in relationships. She supposed it compared to Middle East customs of a certain antiquity or even today. The logistics
of him visiting her home on a now and again basis appealed much more than her joining his kingdom. Where had he come from, how had he become King of the Mole Men, and who would be king after he died? How old was he, anyway?

He allowed the Mrsdm another ten minutes of autopilot and then took over. They rode in silence for a timeless time until Frances' mind drifted to practicalities of a man and woman getting together-together, which she'd never done all the way. She swallowed hard and crossed her legs as the mecha rumbled along, the uneven synchronization of its blades gradually fading from her consciousness.

She'd stopped trembling from her emotional Armageddon and what was left was calm reflection on what could happen next in her life, oh beyond continuing to develop Funkytown, schmooze at Santeria gatherings after the more serious religious events took place, and enjoying the company of Dexter and his nice family. Now that she came to think about it, it was time to have something just for herself on a personal level. She floated to a memory that she had not accessed in quite a while.

Mom's reserve and clipped tones made The Talk a businesslike process when Frances turned fourteen. Frances still recalled her mother's parting words. "When the gentleman makes his entrance, breathe out. Do not expect to like sex straightaway. You will, in time."

A slow smile, a hand pat, and The Talk was over. When Frances compared notes with her friends at Yale, she remained pleased with Mom's parenting. When a jolt and grinding sound reminded her that not was all right with their transport, she jerked her attention to the present.

So. Now what? The Mrsdm clanked. She stole a look at her companion. Moley sat stiffly in the driver's seat, wide lips compressed. The split one looked sore. "Drzhp," Frances murmured, "thank you for pulling me inside and, and back from doing a regrettable thing."

Moley looked miffed as he squinted his near-sighted eyes, well, near-sighted in Frances' regular light, because in pitch blackness, he ruled his world and her when she was in it. Where on or under the earth had his goggles gotten to? She hadn't seen them since his visit to his convention of fellow alphas, the one with his friend, the strange dolphin who perhaps was not so friendly.

"Don't pout, Moley."

"Not."

"Yes, you - "

"Frawnces scare me!" he bellowed. She shrunk back. "I'm sorry to have done that - "

"Lose Frawnces! Lose drzhp!"

"You haven't, I'm here. I'm not leaving."

His grip clenched on the tiller, his bare foot pressed harder on the accelerator. The tunneler's velocity increased enough to shiver its metal timbers as they left Howe Caverns behind.

"Can we talk about this?"

"Dbltm! No!" And so it went for what Frances estimated one hundred miles as she contemplated the mystique of the male principle. If this had been a regular relationship, she could demand to be let out and take an Uber ride home. She spent thirty of the one hundred miles herself pouting that their mode
of transportation stymied a dramatic exit.

They must have been fifty miles outside Manhattan before he calmed; she could tell because his shoulders lost their hunch as much as they ever would. By that time, the whirling blade clanked and the unnamed sheen of protection over the pollucite flared and then receded alarmingly on the damaged portion. She stewed about it, and she kept watch on it through the front viewport. Another three miles passed.

Frances at last had to say something. "Moley, put aside whatever you're going through and tell me we're going to be okay."

"Agnaz."

"I mean both for us and for the Mrsdm. Tell me, Moley."

He rumbled so deeply that Frances swore she saw his chest vibrate through the blood-spattered muslin shirt. "I didn't catch that."

"Yes, Frawnces." A squeal came from the problematical blade and the Mrsdm stopped. Frances peered through the side viewing port as the tunneler's lights flashed outward. No walls or ceiling came in sight to offer glittery scenes to distract and edify. Frances reminded herself that Olorun was everywhere, as everlasting as Brownian motion.

"We're in a big space." Moley didn't answer as he delved for the toolbox under the dash. He opened the hatch and climbed out. Thirty seconds later, a bang, slplskhgrg and a rising whine issued into damp underground air.

Frances whooshed out a breath as she settled to await progress reports. The smaller toolbox indicated good news, because him fetching the larger one behind their seats would mean a larger problem. What if he couldn't fix the issue? What if she and he got stranded down here? Not all hollows in the earth opened to the outside. They would wander endlessly on foot until they collapsed, Funkytown would decay into Ghostytown, and Godmother Felicity would consult with a babalawo or iyalawo to divine their fate. Moley's harem would pine for him and holy crow, she'd never asked him if he had children! Frances squirmed to get comfortable on the no-frills seat cushion.

All will be for nothing, because our two Team Rocket skeletons will add calcium to the minerals of the earth in Ogún's realm - is this comeuppance what Oyá meant about me discovering my limitations - if we wander over sharp formations then Moley's lack of shoes might hurt him - he has moves I've never seen on any human dance floor and had removed his shoes to show me the cutest trick using both pinky toes - our rhythm together does not require music - I pulled on my boots as we leaped into the Mrsdm when Moley polished off the red wine and hollered "I teach Frawnces to drive!" - Plan B is worse than death, now that I think about it - the penguins will be made over in the most basic way possible well okay one will - Frances, you are a predator, girl, Oshosi has nothing on you - ow my behind aches where he smashed me into the ramp - what is keeping him -

Moley poked his head between the chassis of the tunneler and the ramp. His face was blank. "Frawnces come help."

"Huh? Oh, sure."

Standing by the blade under an umbrella-shaped trouble light, she saw that he had turned off the whatever-it-was shiny power source that coated the pollucite on all blades. She was careful not to touch any surface of any blade. If he turned it off, then the pollucite containing reactive rubidium was
bare to any moisture in the air, from her skin, from errant drips from above. Did the enormous expanse of this cave preclude any humid drops or drips? What skills did he have, what tech did he employ to disable the hmdo from its explosive, power-generating quality so he could repair a vital blade?

Moley wove his massive shoulders through the blades without looking whether he would touch them or not. He measured the troublesome one with what she assumed to be a version of an ohmmeter, then took a reading off a compass, and finally brought out a length of glowing string. "Frawnces stand at pointy end to hold zort."

She took the end of the string between finger and thumb, making sure not to let it actually touch the tip of the blade. He took the other end, placing it under his lumpy middle finger atop the housing where the ten foot blade joined the chassis. "Whash zort say?"

She leaned over it. "I don't hear anything."

He dropped his end of the string, laughing fit to be tied as he slapped his thighs. "Frawnces funny!" He picked it up again and nodded at her to try once more.

Just like that, she knew that she and he could continue as friends, drzhps, and maybe something more in time. "You, you smartapple. All right, all right, I'm big enough to be the butt of a joke. Let me see."

The string glowed eerily, all except for three stylized numerical figures near her pinky. She hoped she interpreted the curlicues correctly. "Eight nine three."

"Cmloop!"

"If you say so."

"Frawnces, two ko and we go!" He boosted her into the air and spun her as if she were a child. Her skirts flared as her bracelets rattled.

Ko were, um ... minutes? Hours? Days? She didn't know, she didn't care, and hey, it might be fun to learn more of Ogún's world. She would have firsthand news to share with her godfamily.

Frances laughed as she braced her hands on Moley's shoulders while her legs clipped his waist. Life underground, above ground, or in the spirit world was good and getting better.

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Chapter 49

The ray of eldritch energy sizzled through the air to strike a glimmer of a stalactite after it climbed the laser warped sluice of red waterfall. It zinged and zanged and even penguin reflexes could not track it. Skipper froze in Routine Six: Play Statue as he waited for its force to dim, diminish, or dissipate. What would make it disappear? He needed Kowalski to spout some physics at him, but then the ray struck that which was not a reflective surface.

It hit Private square in the back, making his coat phosphoresce for a second. "Private! Nooooo!"

"Wot just happened? Is this bad glowin'? I don't feel anythin' different!"

Frances Alberta cackled like the Wicked Witch of the West. "I'll get you, my pretty, and your little friend, too!"

What happened next would forever remain a blur. After the two humans shouted at each other, the mecha's door slammed shut after the Ruler of the Mole Men grabbed Frances Alberta about the waist to haul her inside. The mecha idled out a thunder as more lethal stalactites spiked downwards. Grinding like a giant pepper grinder must have occurred in the aft tunneler mechanism that they couldn't see, because the chassis disappeared backwards down its hole to be followed by the swirling blades, one of which appeared out of sync. Water seethed around the vehicle, purple reactive foam bubbled and splped and the laser light bending vanished although it left imprints on penguin retinas. Skipper blinked rapidly.

"Evasive, Private!" The hole's edges blazed purple for a light source as pippopps issued among bubbling stuff that resembled lavender soan papdi, which was good because their Maglite was nowhere to be seen. Finding that came first even before checking on Private's condition. Skipper slowed his waddle, got to his knees and groped for the flashlight. The purple glow faded faster than Skipper thought it ought. The diminishing rumble of the tunneler's retreat plummeted three more razor-like stalactites to add to the danger. The commander stood firm after discovering the Maglite.

"Private! Sound off!"

"Over here. I'm okay, Skippa." A click, a shake of the Maglite in patented effective Skipper style and then his love's face appeared as a floating head in complete darkness. "Crikey, she's a complete nutter and I don't know wot to say about him."

Skipper hunkered down to the gravel and looked about ruefully. "A vacation. You want a lousy vacation and what you get is Cray Cray Lady and her Zombie Friend." All right, all right, so the guy wasn't a real zombie, but the term fit close enough. Let Kowalski come up with a better description when they got back home.

Private squatted beside him. "Do - Do you see anythin' strange about me?"

Skipper played the beam all over his love's back, front and sides. He lifted each foot and flipper, bent the head forward and backward and checked between the legs. "All clear."

"Phew. I guess even evil zookeeper ladies can have weapon malfunctions, right, Skippa?"

Skipper maintained hope that his senses played him straight. "Yeah. Yeah." His grip shook and the beam bobbled. "By Patton's slaps, I've got a bad case of the gollywobbles."

"M-Me, too."
They trembled in concert until Skipper turned his thoughts into words. "Frances Alberta and her boyfriend sounded less like they planned an attack on animals and more like a couple out on a joyride."

"I agree. Usin' a noisy machine like theirs on an attack on our HQ, Skippa, we'd know it if Mole Men used our tunnels, like you thought one time."

Their shared dangers all in one day made Skipper break some commanderly reserve. "True, that idea proved a non-starter."

He gathered his wits. "The upside is that Becky and Stacy got to date Carlos, Kendall, and those other two beavers."

Of course, Private recalled their names perfectly. "James and Logan."

Justice demanded that Skipper present the whole picture. "But Blowhole used our tunnels and breached security in the nastiest way possible. I mean, what could be worse than a crazoid dolphin in our very home?"

"Alice knowin' about our operation," Private answered readily.

"Point. That's a horror floor scenario I hope we'll never see."

Private twitched at the sound of a stalactite falling tardily someplace near what was left of the cave's natural opening. He grabbed Skipper's flipper and held on tight. "We're alive. That's enough, for now."

Joy at being alive coursed through them and they turned to each other, their glow of love rivaling that of the effervescent purple soan papdi-like bubbles.

"Hiatus endin' soon, Skippa?"

"Later, babe, a little later. There's no better reason to have sex than after a victory." Skipper stood.

Private scouted ahead at the signal for Routine Four: Scout Ahead, I'll Catch Up Later. "Look, Skippa, here's another hole and some stuff they left behind."

The water level in the stream sank further but such was the volume of the flow that the waters settled into two inches depth rather than three. Ten minutes after the tunneler's departure, the sucking sound quieted to the usual gurgle. Skipper shook off his battle nerves to recon the area where the tunneler tunneled sometime previously. No sign remained of foamy purple residue around the lip of the hole so the problem with their mecha began when Frances Alberta piloted the vehicle. Interesting.

Skipper waddled to the couple's blankets spread over grit that couldn't have been comfortable for humans and near-humans. He upped his estimation of their toughness as he surveyed the opening to the outside quarry twenty feet up and twenty-five feet off. The round shape resembled the palest moon seen through dense fog as light filtered in from some distance through what he assumed was a tunnel through solid rock. It was likely around four p.m. As he watched, cloud cover must have blown in because the light dimmed even more.

Skipper tsked as he appropriated a discarded Maglite. "Litterbug zombies, the worst kind. Millard Fillmore's muffler, look, two belts and a pair of shoes!" He sniffed. "And a pair of dirty socks, ew."

Private kicked at empty plastic baggies, candles, a whisk and other mysterious bits of human garbage. "Wot is all this?"

"The less we know about humans, the better, so let's burn what we can when we get that fire
started." He waggled an empty bottle, sniffed it and put it back down. "Eh, the red stuff. I like rosé better and white wine best."

Private looked skeptical after a knowing nod. "You purist, you. Not doubtin' your leadership, Skippa, but oughtn't we make a strategic withdrawal towards home? Wot if they return? Wot then?"

Uh oh, it was time to come on from strength. "We'll deal. Numero uno, their tunneler makes noise up the wazoo giving plenty of notice now that we know what the racket is. Numero dos, we came to enjoy a vacation and we'll do that or my name isn't - "

"Honey."

"Yeah, something like that, guv'na." Skipper sobered. "Look, we did okay facing them down with Routine Seventy-One: Zombie Apocalypse, right?"

Private quivered more than usual as Skipper took note of it. "Let's never use it again!"

"Somehow I don't think we'll need to. That Moley guy got her away from battling penguin commandos, good on him."

"She was a right nutter." Private had stated this before. He was jittery enough to harp on what had frightened him, well it had scared the both of them. Skipper registered that fact before continuing.

"I don't understand what she did, either. I mean, I understood what she said except for the mumbo jumbo language, but what stood out is that she has a mad on against me as bad as Blowhole's."

Private sought to smooth the waters, the darling. "She's from Hoboken originally even though she works in Manhattan, and you've always said that nothin' good ever comes out of Hoboken, Skippa, like Gacy - "

"I will die happy if I never hear that name again."

"Sorry sorry! I forgot!"

"Mmmm. Let's build that fire."
Private was unsure that Skipper could hear him but exclaimed in joy anyway. "Huzzah, I found the mug!" Private collapsed the collapsible mug, put on its tidy cover to keep it clean and balanced it atop the wad of twigs he carried.

Skipper's reply came quickly through the echoes seventy-five feet away. "And I've got the Hello Kitty backpack, so Operation: Flambeau is a go go go!" He ought to have considered his commander's ace hearing, really he ought. Private waddled slowly back to what they were beginning to think of as their campsite. Odds and ends that the humans had abandoned anchored their blankets. Skipper plottzed at one edge of the woolly expanse and gestured to the pile of sticks in the scoop he'd constructed. "Cozy enough?"

"Super." With a suggestive wink, Private added more fuel to the fire. "A soothin' fire, oh yes." Without asking, he poked through the backpack to produce matches and lit the tinder that Skipper had shredded from the pith of the sticks. After they both blew on the bits, spark turned to flame. "Ahhhh," breathed Private. He captured Skipper's beak in both flippers and kissed to either side of its tip as if he were French. "I love when your beak is in that position."

"Private, let's dance."

"Now? On gravel?"

Skipper held firm. "No better time." He hummed a Strauss waltz, a favorite of Kitka's but Private didn't need to know that. He slipped both flippers about Private's waist as he bent his greater height over his love's. Foreheads touching, beak tips bussing, the two penguins shuffled in a rectangle as sharp-cornered as Kowalski could have calculated.

"Mmmm, good beginnin' to better days ahead. More, Skippa, I want more."

Private had the music in him and so did Skipper as they waltzed as if on a subdued Dancing With The Stars. After three minutes of scuffing gravel, Private's growing excitement made him stumble out of step. They danced, swirled and shuffled a moment while Skipper licked the feathers apart over Private's earhole before breathing into it.

"Easy, follow my lead. Relax and let me guide you just like in training for throat singing."

Private mumbled into Skipper's throat as he slipped back into rhythm. "Thank everythin's that's penguin that we learned it for that one time we needed it."

We're not home yet, Skipper wanted to say. The warning didn't get past his thoughts. No, no warnings, no worries about whatever the deuce Frances Alberta schemed with her weird hunched friend, or whatever was going on with Alice, or whatever the hell the spider monkeys had up their, er, sleeves - he stopped himself. This vacation was for loving. He gave Private a little squeeze without losing the beat of the dance.

It was time to heat things up.

"Bug out, Private!"

"Wot? Are we under bat attack?" Private disengaged in confusion. Damn, he looked like a hundred bucks when he was all fluttery like that.
Skipper pulled him chest to lower chest with himself in a sweetheart push. "Jitterbug out, that is! Like on Fasta Island!" Skipper whooped while he threw Private over his head as if he flapped a blanket dusted with sand. "I'm all healed up, so no phoning it in!"

Private landed with his thighs grabbing Skipper's waist, flippers gripping the sinewy shoulders as if they clung to the rope dangling from Rico's grappling hook. "Woohoo, honey! Routine Eighty-One!"

"Hoo-yah for Manfredi and Johnson, wherever on the Endless Iceberg they waddle! They gave us Routine Eighty-One: Hellyeahaction for the win, babe! Say it again and say it loud, I am a penguin and I am proud!" Skipper shouted.

Private wanted this moment to go on forever.

They needed no outside music from Kowalski's stymied smart phone as their inside music filled their hearts. They danced and swayed. Eventually, even loving hearts could overfill and they plopped down on the blanket. The moment lingered as they lay feather to feather. After a mellow span of time, Private undid the flap of the backpack with a wink and a grin. In the beam of their Maglites, his shadow magnified to ten times his compact body.

Skipper expected the dildo to make an appearance sooner than he would have liked, but was pleasantly surprised when Private waved small birthday sized candles. "Candles, Skippa." He passed the candles to his leader, who set them aside to select a votive light that Frances Alberta and her irradiated mutant friend had abandoned. Really, the strange man left a mystery in his wake. An irradiated mutant sounded not completely paranoid. He'd reserve judgment on the zombie option.

Skipper tossed two similar candles from Frances Alberta's stash into the flames. An unfamiliar scent drenched the cavern's humid reaches. "What is that?"

Private sniffed. "Citronella?"

"I can't tell. That's the thing with smells, they're either good or bad or ought to be. This one is ambivalent. I don't like that in an animal or a smell. You pick the next candle."

"Okay." Private tossed in the next to last candle from the humans. This one was more to Skipper's liking.

Or not.

"Ack! Licorice! Pukehurlbarf! It's as stinky as it tastes nasty, do something!"

Private waved the smoke away best he could. "Be patient, it'll go if I - " and he blew on the fire to make it flare up to burn the candle faster. The tactic spread embers to the side and a few upwards. Tiny red sparkles swirled as Private blew and waved. The red died as quickly as Frosty the Snowman would die in Valdosta, Georgia, on an August afternoon. After a minute, the smell faded. Private placed the birthday sized candles back into the Hello Kitty backpack. No romantic candlelight in the foreseeable future, ho hum.

"Good glory, that stunk. Peeeyew." Skipper stood abruptly to stamp out the embers that had reached the blanket. "How about exploring more of Howe?"

"Er, um, the fire?"

Skipper realized which fire that Private meant. "It'll wait." There was no rush to get physical, despite Olivia Newton-John's song. Olivia likely was hot to trot 24/7 since she was a mammal. Sheesh. Bird
ways were better.

The expression on Private's face showed resignation. Good. When they two reignited their personal fire, the experience would prove that much more memorable. Skipper scattered the glowing twigs safely away from the blanket and passed Private one of the Maglites. "Good thinkin', we'll save the other one's battery," Private said.

"Backwards towards the dam we go! About face!"

Private about faced.

"Forward harch! Hup toop threep fourp - "

Back towards the Howe Caverns Lodge they tramped as Skipper tracked their progress, now and then accessing Mama Nature's magnetic fields to determine how far they traveled.

"I'm keepin' count, too, Skippa." Private swiveled his head north, south, east and west. "We're comin' up to the place where K'walski said old liar Howe spoofed people."

"How so?"

Private snorted. "Aw, I don't see why or how Howe would want to lie to the humans, but they paid their tuppence for tall tales, I suppose. He told them that Benjamin Franklin came down here." He produced an echoing raspberry. "Pbbllbllbllsh. Tall tales or lies, wot's the difference?"

Sometimes Private was just too square. "Faith and begorrah, d'ye mean to say, Private me lad, that ye dinna believe in the Little People?" Oops, dinna dinna sound right in the Irish. Skipper goosed Private as they waddled along.

"Awp! Stop that! You said you wanted to wait - "

"Okayokay, sheesh. Just playing with you, babe." They marched under sparkling gypsum deposits until a large room loomed. Through a jagged arch they strode, admiring the way their Maglite flashed on the faceted surfaces. At last, they halted before the largest single standing stone they'd yet seen. Its striking bulk resembled Burt The Elephant and his girlfriend lying close together, if the zoo ever issued Burt a girlfriend. Smooth and gray, the surface showed scribed markings. The fonts of the marks resembled the varying sizes that Phil went on and on about. The two penguins studied the rock.

"Writin', innit?"

Skipper licked the largest clean circle in front of his face. He moved to the pointy angles of the character to its right. "Yes. Writing." He kept a straight face. "Probably where old Benny Franklin signed his name."

Private's voice sounded bitchy to Skipper's earholes. "Oh noooo, I'm not risin' to the bait because I'm no dorado, I'm no minnow, I'm no sal- "

"Stop before you inventory the waters of the world, Private. Besides, tall tales like Howe told are fun, they're patriotic Americana like Paul Bunyan, Rip van Winkle and the little man in our icebox who turns the light on and off."

Private smacked his flippers together. "And I'll catch him one day!"

"See?"
"Now you're spoofin' me. I really don't see the difference between tellin' tall tales and lyin' - hold on!"

Why was he looking all around after startling into a jump eight inches off the ground? "We're alone here, babe - "

"Are you sure? Wot about bats?" Private scanned the ceiling with his Maglite. "Wot was that sound?"

Good grief and golly wolly. "Drips and drops like we've heard for hours on end, nothing different. Chill."

Something else set him off. "Wot time is it? Will humans tromp here to see this big fat rock, too?"

"Pretty sure their tours stop at five and it's way past that, more like seven. I say again, chill." Skipper put the state of nerves down to their jolting encounter with Frances Alberta and of course, lack of release due to no sex for quite some time. He'd remedy that soon enough, but damn, the bird was jumpy.

Private paced in a tight circle. "Wot if there's a special Spend A Night In The Caverns tour like there is a Zoo Snooze for spendin' a night in our zoo? Wot about that?"

"Mason would have told us if Phil saw it on the internet website for Howe, so how about we keep on keeping on, hey? Don't get the gollywobbles."

"Oh all right," Private grumped. "If you say so."

They circled the rock known to humans as Signature Rock as the atmosphere grew strained. Skipper resorted to signals for go back the way we came. When they reached the spread blankets, it took two minutes to start another fire. Somehow the flames soothed Private and because they did, Skipper felt better, too. After a brief supper, the silence grew until a subject for a St. Urho's Day conversation presented itself. Maybe they'd even sing the Ballad of St. Urho later, but maybe not. It wouldn't be the same with Kowalski and Rico to round out their quartet. Skipper poked the fire with a warped driftwood piece.

"Private, I know you're all about lovey-dovey gooey mush, but did you ever consider the power of hate?"

"It's nothin' to talk over because it's wrong to hate like it's wrong to lie."

He'd predicted this response. "Talking about wrong makes us right, don't you see?"

"No."

Skipper powered through. "Hate can motivate us to do right. I hate space squids, for example, and every time we encounter them, I hate them more." He pulled back. He was spilling his guts and it didn't feel right. A better tactic was to explain his feelings. Ew. Feelings talk, touchy feely. Ew. Better get it over with quick. "They, they endanger us all, animals and humans and our whole damn planet. They earned my hatred."

Private looked at him as if he didn't know him. Skipper refused to backpedal. "Well, I do hate them. I'm being honest."

"So I see." Private continued to stare. Abruptly, he opened the backpack to retrieve the coffee makings again and produced a steaming mug in record time. He opened a tin of anchovies to drape
one little fish on the mug's lip. The smell of the anchovies registered as a homey odor and quelled their nerves a little more.

Skipper had resolved to prolong the quiet but the resolve quailed in the steady regard of his love. "If you think the less of me for it, I can't help it. They are pure evil." He accepted the coffee.

The stare stopped, thankfully. Private stirred the fire. "This sounds personal, Skippa. Wot did they do to you?"

"What do you mean what did they do to me? They are, are space squids! It's right there in the name, for Quisling's sake!" Skipper felt squeezed around the chest as if tentacles gripped him again, like they had when - he cut off the memory and took a deep breath. "They poke and prod and stab and squeeze and [inject]."

"Like needles, you mean? With poison or somethin' like K'walski's truth serum?" Private's voice softened from blunt inquiring sharpness. "So I see. That must have been the worst. You needn't tell me more, honey."

The fire blazed with the both of them poking it. As embers rose, so did Skipper's memories despite his efforts to squash them down into a tiny little hate ball. "They captured me in Atlantis, Private. They did things I only half remember. Needles were just part of it."

Private sounded like he wanted to believe but was having a hard time of it. "Skippa, space squids are the reason you're afraid of needles?"

"Maybe! I don't know! I always thought it started when Gacy tranked me with that dart! But, young Private, space squids! Ew! Ew! Eeeeesh!" The commander executed a full body shiver before continuing. "I was young and foolish on my first solo mission and tried to tough it out fighting them alone when I got separated from my Atlantis squad. Those tentacles came from nowhere, I tell you. Before my eleven-bird team charged the squid pod to rescue me, I was disarmed, injected, turned turtle and - well, let's just say they dove where the sun doesn't shine." Skipper pulled himself together and raised Private's estimation of him more than ever. He swigged a long drag at his coffee and his shaky coffee nerves forced the long dead anchovy to wiggle on the rim of his mug. He sat it down with an oath before turning to his most junior squad member. Private glimpsed a younger, more vulnerable Skipper. "What the hell intel do they expect to find up there?"

Private gave a helpless shrug. There were times when he felt ineffective in his unofficial capacity as morale officer. "Wot happened next?"

"Sarge dragged me to safety."

Private reached out to pat the rigid shoulder and then pulled back. He yearned to comfort the dread thoughts away, but there was no remedy for memory. After a minute, Skipper shone the Maglite to the stalactite's glittery shards that spiked down from the ceiling. "I can see beauty in these sharp formations now where I couldn't for months after Atlantis." He hugged himself and clicked off the Maglite. Now the only light was from their fire.

Prince Sharesalot said it was best to highlight the positive in such tales. "So this Sarge saved young you from more indignities." An idea occurred. "Did he give you a butterscotch lolli afterward?"

Skipper barked a laugh and some tension left his frame. "A lolli? Private! You're too much!"

"Wot? A hug then?" After hearing the space squid story, he formed connections between fear of
being probed with tentacles and of being probed with needles. He made himself the butt of his commander's amusement deliberately. Hearing laughter in the deepest chasm-y caverns was worth the price of being seen as befuddled. Any morale officer worth his salt never quibbled at making himself the butt of a joke for the good of the team.

Skipper lost it. After wheezing to recovery following a fit of coughing, he continued, "Private, he recommended that I go back to OCS for a do over. He said, and I quote, 'Come back when you grow up, boy, so I don't have to save your sorry ass.'"

"Rude!"

Skipper blew a raspberry. "Sarge are like that, at least every one of them I've met. No, he was right on about me and I learned more about life from him and that shit Hans in Copenhagen two weeks after Atlantis than I learned in OCS." He frowned and the flickery light from the embers shaded his face more to the macabre than Private liked.

"Hold on, you commanded eleven in Atlantis?"

"Yeah. What a trial for a rookie officer, too. I never heard so many excuses why a penguin couldn't report for duty. Atlantis holds a buttload of distractions, like Coney Island only wilder."

"Wot are they?"

Skipper held forth as much as he was authorized to, Private realized. "It's a magical place under the Atlantic. I think nearby Rio loaned them their congas and macarenas for their delightful mermaid dance clubs - " He caught himself. "Never you mind. When your next promotion comes through, your security clearance will rise and then we'll talk Atlantis." He grinned. "Sirummock vais numalor."

"Wot?"

"That's Atlantean for hurry up and wait, which is the motto of any fighting unit, am I right?"

"Oh, I get it, Skippa. I can wait. I can wait for a great many goodies."

Skipper's yawn ended in a grunt. "OCS chipped away my rough edges to make me a gentlepenguin and Hans and Sarge brought them out again. I don't pretend to explain it and hell's bells, this is more thinking than we need on a vacation. Lights out."

Private obeyed as he made to drip water from their canteen onto the fire.

"Hold on, not the water. We head away from the stream tomorrow and water'll be scarce. Use sand."

"Righto, sir." Private scooped gravel on the flames and snapped a mini glowstick, which would last for only a few minutes. With glowsticks a comforting touch of technology in the bowels of the earth, Mama Nature seemed friendlier than she had when they tumbled ass over teakettle in currents as strong as any in which either of them had ever swum. Feeling a little lonely without his Lunacorn to cuddle despite the stellar company, Private glanced at Skipper relaxing and nudged his own tailfeathers closer on the blanket to the powerful silhouette. Which Lunacorn would his commander be? A King to Queen Pleaseandthankyou? King - half a moment, now - King Justiceforall? Yes, that suited Skipper to a tee.

The stories made him a bit wakeful but to his surprise, venting them to an audience of one turned Skipper into a snoring machine within one minute. Perhaps Private had fulfilled his role as morale officer more than he had thought. He opened his beak in a huge yawn and winced. The water had
surged into their breathing passages not generally wetted and he felt the pressure on earholes and
sinuses. Hmmm, it would be many hours until they reached drying daylight, so the damp would need
to be borne until then. Oh well, this time of closeness to his love was worth it.

He fell into a dreamless sleep and when he awakened, he was in his favorite sleeping position, big-
spooning against Skipper's shoulders. Curled into a fetal ball, Skipper was not snoring in the fastness
of slumber. Was he awake? Private yawned and stretched and ever so carefully Stirred In His Sleep
before easing their shared blanket to their waists. Had his love awakened to what he considered
unwelcome advances? If he had, he did not mention it and after a light breakfast from their opened
tin of anchovies, they set out for drier parts of the caverns.

IOIOIOIOIO
Chapter 51

"So this is Congress. Color me unimpressed."

"Aw, Private, don't go all Brit on me. This represents where democracy happens, becomes real." The two penguins spoke in subdued voices. "Kowalski said he had to pry it out of Phil via Mason that how Howe named the rooms is for Americana."

Private sniffed. "Oh? Like Lake of Venus, Tower of Babble and Haunted Castle? A castle isn't very American to my way of thinkin'." He drifted airily along the nice, flat gravel walkway by the corroded human-sized handrail. Without the stream burbling nearby, the caverns seemed odd. Skipper trailed behind, unwilling to gloss over Operation: Spelunker Bunker by hurrying through it. Too bad that on a lovers' vacation, he couldn't order Private to stop and smell the history. He'd do his best to make the bird remember why they had come.

"It's Tower of Babel and there are so castles in America." Skipper surveyed Congress Hall, one of the largest rooms typically coated in glittering jewels of calcite and shards of faceted stalactites. The flowstone was particularly impressive, ribbons swirling on walls, red, yellow, green. Green represented copper traces, Skipper remembered. There was no purple to indicate rubidium. "Florida has Coral Castle near the old Homestead Air Force Base and there's Sing Sing Prison that we passed, what some call Castle on the Hudson."

Private stopped mid-waddle. "A jail? Not a castle, to my way of thinkin'." Something was up. If Private kept refusing to relax enough into enjoyment of non-sexual things, they may just as well head for home. Skipper was nothing if not determined, however.

"Before you say I can tell this is Congress Hall by all the hot air, let's look around." Startled by Private's attack of the giggles at the lame joke, Skipper smiled uncertainly, and he hated being uncertain. "Oh come on, drink in the atmosphere."

"H-Hot air atmosphere, Skippa?" Now the giggles didn't sound as pleasant as they generally did and Skipper frowned at the touch of hysteria.

"It's Americana."

"Nothin' bad about that, I-I s'pose." Private appeared to get himself in hand. "Okay, I'll sightsee, don't pout."

"Not." He hadn't expected to flare in anger with his love. "Shut up."

"Sir, yes, sir, shuttin' up now, sir." Another hour passed as they strolled along. Soon they waddled easily through openings that humans would need to crawl through. An enormous stalagmite sprouted towards the ceiling to miss joining with it by two feet. If the rock with signatures resembled Burt The Elephant And Friend, this glittery tower resembled Melman The Giraffe, tall and regal and the slightest bit goofy looking.

The mood changed between them as each contemplated the passage of time evidenced by the slow, steady growth of the stalagmite. Drips and drops deposited clear footprints of minerals to gild the top and sides of the structure. The drips of fluid infiltrating from the topside rainy world lost their shape by the time they reached the foot of the growth. Purling sounds more subliminal than not contrasted with the burbling stream they'd grown accustomed to as the smaller waters before them made their way downward to unseen caverns beneath. Skipper wondered where the flow stopped. He made the
"Bats!

Skipper looked where Private pointed. Not live bats on the ceiling, but bones of bats festooned the walls of a chamber that matched Phil's grandiose description of the Haunted Castle. Every possible nook and cranny not draped with smooth flowstone held tiny bat bones. The skulls were the worst.

"Yeah, it's creepy - "

"Eeek! Oooh! It's disgusting!"

What the braaping hell? Private trembled as he hugged himself tightly. He switched to covering his eyes after a moment, peeking, shivering, and covering them again. Where was the brave penguin who dove to the bottom of the Hudson River at its deepest?

Skipper felt his expression twist into disbelief after he rolled his eyes. Really, Private? "That's a given." As commander, he strove to move past the stumbling block of horror. "Kowalski said to expect bat guano in Howe, but how could he predict a Haunted Bat Graveyard? Do you think we've stumbled upon a trove of aged bat guano, which would be worth thousands in the open phosphates market? Think of the fertilizer giving life to peanuts that the Winkie Factory makes into Peanut Butter Winkies, eh?" Private made his trademarked sound of reluctant agreement. "Come on now, get over it. Sheesh."

"I want to go home!" To his credit, Private clapped his flippers over his beak and appeared abashed at his words.

Time to be firm. "Well, we're not until Monday, so march along and don't look anymore if you feel that way about bones. It's nothing worse than other scenes we've come across. Remember how we assumed Manfredi and Johnson's remains were the ones attracting vultures in the Mojave Desert when actually it was that bubbling cauldron of maggots that was all that was left of - "

"Do not complete that sentence, Skippa, please. I've a sensitive stomach."

"And a sensitive everything else, but I love you anyway."

"We've established that."

"And I intend to reestablish it again, and again, and again tonight - "

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

Skipper brushed off the sting. "I never do, babe. Let's set up camp in the midst of death to prove life exists down here."

Private looked about. "Not here, not with death all around. Sorry, I'm not that brave or that dramatic."

Okay, he could give way now and again. Serendipity was worth a bend or two. "Your choice where, then." He straightened the Hello Kitty backpack with its extra blankets tied in horseshoe shape at its top that they'd foraged from Frances Alberta and her BFF, or whatever he was. BFF which meant Buffalo Fire Fighter, Baby Fat Flinger, Bowed Fiendish Fellow, meh. Kowalski could devise a better name for the strange person, if he were a person. He wondered what Rico and Kowalski had done today. Had they patroled as ordered? He snorted. Of course they had; neither Kowalski nor Rico were good liars and they'd crumble at his inquiry like a floppy - urk. He stopped the thought
before placing himself into his own simile.

Private, in the meantime, did that adorable thing with his head, tilting it this way and that as he sensed their location. "The room needs brown walls."

"What the deuce?"

Private nodded firmly, waving them onwards in the direction of the area humans toured most. "It's that way and it has brown walls. I want it."

He'd rediscovered his boldness if he'd consider traveling towards human habitation, even though humans were long gone at this time of night. "You lead, babe, I'll follow."

Half an hour later, a cozy grotto unfolded in the gleam of the Maglites. Skipper compared it to the Blue Grotto of Capri: the Blue Grotto outshone in brash daylight hues, while this Bronze Room's earthy tones appeared more welcoming, somehow. He glanced at his smiling companion. The room was more Private-like. Skipper snugged his hip next to Private's before slipping off his backpack. The backpack intruded bulk when he wanted feather-to-feather contact. After the jarring encounter with Cray Cray Lady and Friend, the night shaped up nicely.

Private nudged his temple against Skipper's. "Glad we're penguins, Skippa?"

"Always, Private, always."

"Me, too."

Skipper opened his eyes from blissful closure. "Wait, what's that on the far wall?"

At human height, black smut besmirched blotches atop the brown flowstone. The blobs betrayed human use of oil lamplight long ago, before Maglites. Skipper fought back a flare of disappointment that this wasn't a virgin cavern because if it weren't for humans, they never would have known about Howe Caverns and undertaken this restorative trip.

Private's beak drooped. "My sensin' recorded only that this room was brown and cozy and homey. It called to me like a magnet. Now the humans dirtied it. Pooh." His head sank on his snowy breast.

"I like this room. I think, Private, that we owe the humans a chance to enjoy it, too, how old Howe did way back when. Mama Nature made it so that birds aren't the only creatures on the planet."

Private's head shot up. "Strange to hear you talkin' about mammals, I mean non-crabby-like."

"Eh, I have my tolerant moments. Come on, let's set up camp and see where the night takes us."

"Yes! Oh, yes!"
Chapter 52

"Private, oh Priiiiiii-vaaaaaate! Where are youuuuuuu?" Where the night had taken them was a game of hide and seek. Skipper channeled the gung ho attitude of an admitted human all the animals nicknamed the Zoo Hunter, the guy who guarded the Central Park Zoo on the nights when Alice stayed wherever she stayed when it wasn't in the upstairs apartment the zoo provided over the Zoo Café. Funny how lately she'd stayed more and more at her own place rather than the sparsely furnished apartment, well, who could figure humans?

No giggle, no rustle greeted his earholes. Private must have grown up more when he wasn't looking. Skipper tiptoed from stalagmite to stalagmite, the thrill of the chase getting to him. When he caught his love, who would make the first advances to the point of the whole trip? Ought he to be the one, as commander? Ought Private be the one, because the trip was his idea? Should they flip for it? Ooops, nobody brought coins and Rico wasn't along on this vacation. That felt strange. Maybe he was relying on Rico too much for the team's needs, just like the Big Boss intimated.

"Heeeeere I ammmmmmm, come and get meeeeeemmmeeeee!" echoed all around. Skipper swiveled his head, seeking Private's whereabouts. Nope, wasn't happening, too many echoes. Skipper stepped out from behind a Skipper-shaped stalagmite, being deliberately loud. He'd intimidate Private, that's what he'd do. He'd stomp and swing his flippers and glare masterfully and the boy, uh, man, would giggle and that would be that. He'd glomp onto Private's back as he tackled him, they would struggle and things would heat up naturally. He'd be victor at the conclusion when struggle turned into lust at mutual consent and wouldn't even need the silly old dildo, yes that was it.

He turned off the Maglite. It was dangerous to stagger around in total dark, but hey, he lived for danger. Besides, if a chasm opened up in front of him, he'd hear the difference in air currents and drip echoes, right? It would be just like in the cenotes in the Yucatan, the ones that led to the Ox Bel Ha aquifer system and further, if ever the wishy-washy humans braved the chilly depths farther than a few miles. Private must be bullseyeing his own Maglite to light only his own footsteps, or else he'd gotten brave, too, and shut it down. Skipper swallowed hard as he conjured drastic consequences of one of them breaking a leg and the other needing to cart his love's helpless body out of Howe, how would he manage - No, no, no, no negative Nellie nattering! They could and would complete this mission!

Skipper tripped over Private's outstretched leg and dropped his Maglite. "Damn!"

"See, weren't lookin' down, were you I got the upper flipper - "

They tussled as grimly as if Hans were the opponent. Once Skipper decided to go limp and get this show on the road, the tussle ended with Private crowing, "Got you!" He sat astride his love's back, twisting up both flippers until he captured both in one grip to be able to use the Maglite. He pinwheeled the light and then spiraled it. "Whooeee! I broke the mighty Skippa in under eight seconds, I'm a regular Lane Frost, I am!" He let go the hold swiftly.

Skipper turned over so as to drag his midsection on the slick, warm feathers of Private's underbelly. Oh yes, there it was, his excitement pressing into right where it wanted and needed to be. "As long as you didn't break anything important off, we're good to go."

Private wiggled and squirmed over what he wanted and needed, too. "Mmmm, so I feel. Oooh, isn't it cute?" He plied the Maglite downwards to a quarter-filled cock, peeping its head out of belly feathers like Eggy and his clutch mates did from Mamma Duck's white down when they were newly hatched. Private tickled the cockhead, to be rewarded by a sigh and an oh! He ground down as if
practicing the Hula Hoop in swooping spirals.

"To the Batcave, Robin!" Private got spilled as Skipper leaped up. "No time to waste!"

Private trailed behind, holding both Maglites as Skipper headed in the right direction. "Not the dead Batcave, surely?"

"Nah, just kidding, back to camp! I feel the need for some nooky!"

Private saved his breath for running.

They gained the Bronze Room, where they dove for the blankets and rolled around. Private sat up and cradled the backpack without opening it.

Awkwardness set in.

"Er."

"Um."

"The backpack, if you please, Private?"

"Yes, oh yes!" Private fumbled the zipper until Skipper took it from him. Private's eyes grew round as Skipper extracted a stylishly shaped bottle from an interior pocket that had eluded Private's double check during the packing. "Gammel Dansk, yes! Capital idea to bring it, Skippa!"

"Er, yeah. Dymphna's dilemma, it's just the ticket for relaxing." Skipper solemnly tipped the bottle in Private's direction and swallowed a goodly amount. He licked his beak. "As excellent as remembered. Private?"

"To you, honey." Skipper saw that Private's will strengthened with the judicious swallow of the complex flavor of the beverage. "To us."

"Likewise." With the pleasing warmth coursing through their veins, they turned to each other, skimming feathers with eager flippers, lifting feathers to taste the dimpled skin underneath, nuzzling toes until they gasped in unison.

They left one of the Maglites on by mutual consent, too. Its rays directed upon a bronze-toned ripple of flowstone, the beam offered to the scene not a glare between facets of calcite but a soft glow reminiscent of candlelight. Private's eyes met Skipper's and in the glow, the blues looked the same.

Softened by sentiment, they cuddled until Private stirred his own cock with a bodacious squeeze and swivel. Skipper laughed and did the same, dancing it along Private's. His stayed half mast. Private closed his eyes and opened the Hello Kitty backpack with the other flipper, bringing the dildo slowly to light.

Skipper clung to his notion of independent action. "Nn-" he began, but Private silenced him with a kiss.

"It's been a long while since you wanted me like this. Let me lead."

Oh, hell. "Only for you, babe, only for you."

"I'll make it good for you, you'll see, Skippa. I've been practicin' on Faux Skippa!"

Oh, hell! "What?"
"I said - "

"I don't want to hear about it because it makes me wonder why Miss Perky ordered it online - aagh, brain bleach."

If Private insisted that Miss Perky could not possibly have ordered it but that Rico could, all bets would be off, plus nobody would get off tonight. Skipper saw innate honesty flood Private's soul until the beak opened to say unforgettable words, but then Private surprised him.

"Watch me get ready for you. I've been practicin', honey, because you're so worth it." Without another word, Private opened the cylinder, extracted the lube and flourished a scroll of paper like one in a Chinese fortune cookie. "Marlene stuck this in, oops poor choice of words, sorry, I mean she left this for you and me for this night because she didn't know I'd be practicin' to get everythin' just right. I saw it first when practicin' and now it's your turn." He passed the paper to his love. "It's a note from Marlene," he added helpfully.

Skipper took the note because his cock had turned slack as a snoozing Savio after a big meal and he might as well use this time to solve a mystery. "Last time I checked she couldn't read or write."

"She's just tryin' to be funny and friendly." The drawing showed a pretty pink bow swathing a smiling self-portrait of Marlene, whose face beamed goodwill with no snark.

"We don't need, don't need - "

"I do hope not, but it's here, Skippa, if we do. Relax, it's okay. It's a backup option, like K'walski would say. Beep beep beep - "

"Not nearly funny enough, Private."

"I'm sorry, but I'm goin' forward with my plan unless you scream bloody murder bloody fast."

Shit. Why did life turn so complicated over such a completely natural event? "Meh. Very well, I want this, you want this, so - "

Private flourished the lube's capped end, licking it and keeping eye contact.

Skipper's expression stayed granite.

Private opened the lube and spread a ribbon on the dildo's business end. He placed the lube atop Hello Kitty's whiskers after capping it.

Skipper's beak twitched.

Private massaged the ribbon into a slick coat on three quarters of the dildo, holding the battery end with his dry flipper.

Skipper's gaze followed the movements as he leaned back on his elbows.

Private settled his rump on his heels as he knelt in front of Skipper. Skipper licked his beak as Private eased his legs apart to place one heel on each of his shoulders. The tension amped despite the pleasant lighting and Skipper hyperventilated as Private blew on his opening.

Private took his shiny flipper to smooth the feathers surrounding it apart with lube that plastered them down and asked, "Have you considered pluckin' or shavin'?"

"Have you considered World War Three?"
"I won't hurt you. I promise."

"Yeah, I get it, you've been practicing with a dummy of me, and tonight I'm the dummy oh!"
Chapter 53

*Protect*, thought Private as he powered up the dildo to turtle setting with an *Oh!* from Skipper. *Skippa's never goin' to let this happen, he'll wriggle away or order me to retreat, and I can't, I cannot let that be the end of this, I must sail against the wind like Admiral Bloody Nelson to protect our relationship. Here goes nothin'.* He leaned closer and then straightened. *Wait, wait! Marlene says you can never use too much lube on a dildo!* With a gauging eye to Skipper's every shudder and blink, he switched the dildo to his left flipper, reached for the lube at his right side and placed the tube to his beak. He mouthed the cap off because crikey, sliding back to square one by shutting off the dildo, dropping Skipper's legs to the blanket, putting down the dildo to use both flippers to open the lube's cap, and relubing the thing before hoisting Skipper's legs once more spelled disaster to his plan. His sense of morale was one hundred percent positive the delay would jolt Skipper out of his semi-agreeable mood.

Skipper would slap down all retry attempts.

Private would fail as unofficial morale officer.

Their relationship would stall out, Skipper would find another love or lose himself in his work forever.

Private's breath hitched. Why, oh why, had he taken Marlene's advice about using a dildo and not duplicated the first time that Skipper prepared him for going all the way with sex? Stick with what you know, right? To discard the dildo idea now would jar his scheme and he'd planned so very carefully, he had, he had. He dithered, knowing he was dithering, and got close to tears before mentally slapping himself. If Uncle Nigel could hare off chasing the Red Squirrel following decades of no intel regarding the sneaky spy's last reported position, then his nephew could accomplish no less because he possessed intel *now* and he *knew what to do.*

Private squelched a blob onto the dildo, tossed the lube back onto Hello Kitty, lost the lube's cap somewhere and in the process smeared his dry flipper and a good expanse of his belly with the slick stuff. He rubbed the lube all over the dildo this time, uncaring of mess, and took stock of the sitch. So far, so good: Skipper appeared lost in thought as he stared upwards past the lighted part of their campsite at where he knew stalactites, pointy, hurty stalactites reminded him of space squids and alien invasions piercing where no alien ought to go. Or maybe he was trying to settle himself down through facing bad memories? Was it working? How could he help?

Private planted a firm, calming flipper on Skipper's right ankle, the one that threatened to clench to its mate with Private's neck strangled in the middle. He slithered the tip of the humming dildo around the ruched ring of the opening. Skipper jumped a mile, or so it seemed, and a *mmuuuuh* escaped him.

The lubed feathers parted even more to disclose the entire ring and where plasticky Faux Skipper would have squeaked as Private slipped in the dildo, the real article flinched. Private held his breath. This was the crux of the technique that Marlene had coached him in. Easy, easy, a dollop of torque - he twisted a quarter turn, pushed, and the dildo slid in like Flynn if Flynn would have been content with dipping in one half of himself - and then Private rested his cheek on the ankle that quivered atop his shoulder. He stroked the ankle without fully letting go of his grip in case of an escape attempt, and he licked the solid knob of bone as he allowed Skipper to adjust.

"I don't think it's possible to lick someone cl-clean," murmured Skipper, trembling. Private shied away from wondering what condition his commander would be in without some Dutch courage to warm his blood.
"Everyone's a comedian," smiled Private. He stayed stock still until Skipper's shoulders dropped a trifle as he breathed easier. Then Skipper asked that which neither Private nor Marlene had considered.

"D-Did you practice this on yourself?"

Honest answers were easier to remember than lies. "No."

"How about on Marl- "

"No! I mean, she told me wot do to without demonstratin' like, like that, and I said I understood. I do understand, Skippa."

"Then you're one up on me."

A notion flitted through Private's brain, too wispy to be caught by his mind's broad, kind meshes. He was left with a fleeting comparison of an outer space squid's rude invasion of personal inner space to Skipper's vow never to inflict the same on anyone he loved. At least, it remained in character for his leader to swear an oath to himself like that, similar to the one he'd sworn to never visit Hoboken, New Jersey. He'd remained close-beaked regarding such an oath about not hurting a loved one, but he had frequently cursed Hoboken, New Jersey.

Except for their feelings, it stood to reason that Skipper never hurt Kitka or Doris. Private didn't think he had hurt any of his other loves, either, whoever they were. Most likely, he had been gentleman enough to slip away in a dignified fashion after breaking things off in person.

Private left Lola out of the mix deliberately because he'd never known what to think about her.

It was time to saddle up and move. A smidgen at a time, Private shuttled the dildo in and out. His grip slipped once on the gloopy, vibrating plastic and Skipper's breath caught, but there was no discomfort on his dear face. Private mined deeper and as he built momentum, he added more torque. Skipper panted now, clutching the blanket in excited spasms, rolling his head with eyes shut. He moaned.

Perversely, Private stilled his movements. Pulling out the dildo and gentling the legs onto the blanket, he straightened up to survey his love's urgent need. He rubbed his back before he buttered one flipper against the other until both gleamed to the elbow in the dim light. Somehow, Private's nerves quietened and he knew what he had to do next: scissoring, yes that was the term Marlene had used. He glanced down to note that Skipper was receiving his attentions very well, indeed. He told his own excitement to wait.

There was a low sob and then the thud of a curled fist hammering a blanket as Skipper opened his eyes to command, "Ramming speed, Private! Ughnn!"

There was no reply worthy to the order except to continue as the otter had directed. If her instructions failed, then as last resort there remained the rabbit setting on the dildo. Private stooped directly above his target, nibbling the inside of Skipper's thighs just for fun, first right and then left. He circled the preening gland with a tender beak tip and when it ladled a drip of oil, he wanted to dance as he smeared the stuff to good effect into the lube. This was going almost exactly to plan, he thought, and then stopped cold after replacing Skipper's ankles on his shoulders. Private, you git! You don't have digits to scissor with! Stupid, stupid, stupid!

He just knew he had a constipated look as Skipper locked eyes with him. Private offered a cheesy smile. Skipper shook his head no no no what's wrong?
Then, as feared, the ankles drifted from Private's shoulders and Skipper's face fell, among other things. Resignation swamped disappointment on the face as quickly as a chameleon could change color while Private fought his demons of doubt and won. Whatever came of this effort, the results would be all on him, not on Marlene, not on Skipper. "Never give up, Skippa, that's wot you'd do, righto? Lie back and let me work so you can just feel. I'll save us." He pushed Skipper's legs up and apart and Skipper seemed to divine that the mission was to hold them that way. He did, abs taut, as he curled forward on braced elbows to see what Private was doing while curiosity replaced resignation.

Private ducked under the legs to grab the lube and slather both flippers thick with it. He eased them inside his love, the second alongside the first. Skipper bit off a whimper and lay flat, surrendering to skills he'd marvel at later. The legs settled on Private's shoulders once more.

Inside the tight canal Private grabbed his own flippertip and formed a ball. Working his two appendages as a unit, he began to pump cautiously. Skipper's frenzied movements urged him further in as a cock at parade rest filled in its own good time.

One thrust knocked Private's flippers into perfect position. With his tongue hanging out in concentration, the young bird began to torque his two flippers like a Kenmore washing machine agitator, back and forth, back and forth. One rolled over the sweet spot, the second tantalized the opening. Gradually, he increased his speed while the cock stood to attention as if the Big Boss inspected her Central Park Zoo base personnel.

Thick, fast pants filled the air. Skipper's hips snapped as a moan built in the semi-darkness.

Private fell against Skipper and pressed his cheek against the slickened belly feathers. He murmured something he'd never remember. Whatever it was was lost in the passion of Skipper's cries.

Private smiled broadly as his cheek bounced. He could control this part enough to have a bit more personal fun before solving the final problem. He slid out and wrapped his flippers tightly around Skipper's waist to pull Skipper hard against his body. Slithering forward like Savio pursuing a tasty small mammal, jamming his own excitement into the soft feathers of Skipper's shin before plowing forward to kiss the strong jawline, he ground down in earnest on Skipper's cock while he peppered more kisses. Skipper did not kiss back while his hips pistoned faster and faster as if set on overdrive. It was all right that Skipper remained absorbed in pursuing his own pleasure; the next step was split seconds away. Private reluctantly quit kissing to look back over his shoulder.

And there was the signal. The feet waving in the Maglite's diffused glow spread their toes, six sharp-clawed spearheads to win this battle that wasn't actually a battle. "He spreads the toes, now in he goes!" Marlene had chanted in her lesson. Perhaps she meant to sprinkle a lighter mood on his worried face that day, he didn't know. The rhyme was a smashing good memory helper, though.

If Private shouted as he yearned to he'd break the mood, so he whispered. "Now." He disengaged enough to present his back to his love as he rolled in the loose embrace, kneeling up to drag Skipper's enthusiastic flippers around his neck. He bent as far as possible and when he felt Skipper's body align properly, he reached back to slick and then spread himself. "Now, Skippa. It's all right. I'm ready for you."

The most welcome groan in the world filled Private's earholes as Skipper knelt in turn behind Private and shoved himself into warm depths until it was simply too much to bear. Skipper came after five pushes and Private followed not long after.
Skipper pulled a feather off his tongue.

"That was ever so nice, Skippa."

"Oh, yeah, you taste the best all over."

"You didn't have to do wot you did afterwards. I'm not hurtin' in any way, shape or form."

"Excelente."

The Maglite dimmed after a brief frazzly flare. "We ought to turn it off for the night, eh? Save the juice and all that. Wot do you say?"

"I say I want to look at you another five minutes. You blew me away and that happens, well, not often."

Private giggled. "Do I get a medal?"

"Hell yeah! Your actions proved you worthy enough for The Right Honorable Order Of The, The -"

"Nine Volt Battery?" Private nestled his love's head closer to his. "Movin' right along, we're both sticky. We'll stay sticky for another whole day. Oh, bother."

"What do you think of playing chicken?"

Private pulled away to a little thwpt sound as he detached from Skipper's side. "Did you stuff our car in Hello Kitty's pockets, too? I wouldn't put anythin' past you!"

Skipper rolled over, chuckling. His voice sounded hoarse as he answered, "Nah, that's impossible unless Kowalski activated his shrink ray. I mean, let's do like the Blue Hen and her flock and take a dust bath since there's no water nearby." He traced Private's collarbone. "We'll wind up dirty but unstickified."

"A-All rightyroo, I'm game."

Skipper scootched to the blanket's edge and sifted the nearest gravel. "Too coarse." He arose to wander nearly out of Maglite range. "It's more velvety over here. Kowalski would know why." He settled himself breast down in the silt and fluffed his feathers, shuffling his legs and rolling his throat in it, too. He looked like he was sitting on a clutch of eggs like a chicken would, well, a nicer chicken than the Blue Hen, Private thought dreamily before he caught himself. He shook his head at the stray notion and joined his commander, fluffling, scrabbling, rolling, laughing, and clucking. They played as they dusted every inch of their coats, making a mess of what used to be glossy black and white. They even rubbed silt between their toes because lube had gotten everywhere. A pleasing consequence was that tiny flakes of silica and mica embedded in silt sparkled here and there amid their stubbled scruffiness.

They returned to the blankets and doused the light. "You, I mean our team, put a lot of faith in K'walski. He's placed us in danger more than once. You've said it yourself." Private settled back to back with Skipper, wiggling until he got comfortable. The grit made a companionable noise as feather rasped against feather.
Private figured that Skipper slept because of the lengthy silence until a thoughtful comment emerged from their pillow talk. "His heart is in the right place. And he's smarter than you, me, Rico, or even the Big Boss."

Ulps, he'd stuck his grubby foot in his beak. He'd better make things right. "Oh, I know he's smart. He tells us twice a day." Where had that remark come from? Make things better, nothing, he was making things worse. "I, I mean he - "

"Rico is lucky to have him." Was that a warning note in the voice that moaning had turned into a throaty purr?

"Sure, right you are! Doris was the loser in that match, I'll bet she weeps into the kelp every time she thinks about it! She'd just better not come back here, that's all I've got to say! Well, goodnight then!" Private kissed the air loudly.

Skipper didn't kiss back. "Now hold on. Doris isn't a bitch, not by a long shot. Sometimes animals simply aren't good for each other. Kowalski would have seen that like I did. Eventually." Before Private could come up with more than an uncomfortable "uh if you say so", Skipper continued, "Doris likes flaunting her beautiful streamlined body and Kowalski likes flaunting his beautiful bulbous brain. That's about as different as two animals get, don't you think?"

"Well, er, well, she may not be wot you said but she hurt him! Bad!" Private blurted. "All that time later, he'd get tears in his eyes just mentionin' her. You saw it, too, didn't you?" Chinwagging about sex was easier than flailing on the subject of soul pain and Private regretted blabbing about Kowalski. There was an edge to his thoughts and he didn't know why. Suddenly, he felt keyed up and almost spoiling for an argument. "I know you did."

"Psssh, sure I did, duh. I just didn't know what to do about it. And then Rico came on to him when we were on Åland or vice versa I don't really care and I didn't need to requisition an appointment with Doctor Hooha or whoever else the Big Boss assigns to help commandos face up to reality." The commander paused to take a breath. "Kowalski is doing fine, the team is fine and you and I are fine. In fact, Kowalski's hinted that he's working on something extra special. I'm not at liberty to say more because I don't know more." Finally, Skipper air kissed as he rubbed his heel against Private's. "Let's rest."

"Let's." Sleep swam away from Private like startled minnows as his thoughts buzzed around Skipper's defending Kowalski so strongly until he fell asleep without knowing he was going to. When he awakened, it was to the sight of Skipper poking the fire he'd resurrected, the strong back curved gracefully over the growing flames. Flecks of silt provided flickers of reflected firelight here and there to partially gild the outline. Private spent long minutes contemplating the back, envisioning the front. He wanted more of it.

The twigs in the fire snapped, sending sparks swirling high. All around them water drops dripped, sinking into gravel without forming a stream. Bronze Room beauty lies under the surface, Private rambled to himself, bronze is a quite dirty, dusky brown and we'll both look brownish like isabelline penguins in daylight, mucked up as we are. He snugged into the blanket, wanting more warmth, too lazy to get up. "Honey?"

"Mmmm?" The voice was still hoarse and Private thrilled as he remembered how it got that way.

"I'm cold. Cuddle me?"

"Always."
Twenty minutes later, Private felt warm enough and Skipper slept again. The fire had died to embers once more. Skipper shifted in his sleep, a soft moan erupting as he curled deeper into the blanket cozied between the two of them. He mumbled, tossing something aside as he turned over. Great googly moogly, it was the cap to the lube. Private replaced it firmly, noting that half the lube remained.

Private brushed a disordered feather from Skipper's forehead and even in slumber, Skipper reached for his love.

Private sighed against the terminator of black and white as Skipper's pulse throbbed beneath his temple. "I needed this."

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Ten hours passed before Private poked Skipper's shoulder. "Wakies! Here I always thought commandos slept light as a pinfeather and woke alert straightaway."

"Mmm."

"Come on now, we've yet to explore the rest of Howe, how can you just lie there asleep?"

"Hhhhhhuhm."

"The Big Boss wants you in her office yesterday!"

A yawn. "Herrrrrrr?"

"Yeah, her. Get up, rise and shine, greet the new day that K'walski's smartphone says it is. It's so smart that it knows the time even down here. Which is nineish, by the by, lazybones."

Private tickled the slack instep to result in a twitch and cracking open of one eye.

"Cut that out! And even the Big Boss herself doesn't wake up *inmediatamente.*"

"No, I suppose not - hang about, how do you know - "

Private couldn't help a titter as Skipper snapped into action. "Let's roll, what are you waiting for, pack a lunch and we'll explore other rooms, I'll move camp while you do that because tours start at ten, let's meander Underground HQ to the anteroom of the Bronze Room that we spotted coming in, must be gorgeous places yet here in Howe, how about we skip breakfast?" He arched into a nip up, kissed Private's cheek and made like a toad to hit the road. He shoved the backpack off the blanket.

Private shook his head as he gathered Hello Kitty. The dimmer of the two Maglites he thrust into the backpack along with the canteen and smartphone. "Hmm, wot else?"

"Dirty dirt removal incoming, watch yourself!" Private almost lost his footing as Skipper yanked up the blanket to flap a cleansing snap over his head like a matador enticing a bull, flopped it down again to roll nearly all stray items inside it, packed it into a messy oblong, and dragged it behind him to the Bronze Anteroom. The brighter Maglite that Skipper had snatched surveyed the maw-type arch leading to the Anteroom and parts beyond. "So we keep campin' in the general vicinity and return later?" Private called to the back of Skipper's head thirty feet away. He surveyed the selected litter of goods left behind after he'd kicked apart the evidence of their fire.

"Ten four! And we'll work up an appetite, pack at least three tins of anchovies!"
"Aye!" The small pile of their belongings at his feet made the Bronze Room area feel more like home than ever. Private appreciated the lightening of the backpack as he tightened its straps and set out after his leader.

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"Bricks?"

Skipper matched Private's nonplused tone. "Humans can't resist bringing their claptrap underground, Private. We penguins make do with Mama Nature in the raw."

They stood in front of two steps that led down to a larger display of human disturbance than usual. A brick floor slightly larger than their faux floe at home spread two steps under them for fifteen feet with four steps marching up to a blank wall across the anteroom. Anyone climbing the four steps had mighty little room to gavotte or river dance or whatever humans did when they reached the top. In front of the four steps was a calcite heart inlay the diameter of six penguins end to end in the midst of the bricks. The Maglite reflected more dully upon it than if the heart were not artificially smoothed for wimpy human feet.

The two penguins descended the steps to mount the inlay. Both their Maglites played upon the outline of their feet on hard mineral. Skipper hopped up and down to make certain it was steady. "Ley line marker? St. Valentine's Day shrine? Feng shui? What could this be?"

At the moment Private landed his first hop, the calcite glowed after all the antechamber's lights clicked on whumpwhumpwhump in sequence. "Awp! Wot the aitch eee double hockeysticks?"

"It must be ten o'clock, Private, and humans turned on the electricity to the caverns. Tours start now so we'd best head out and about where they don't go." Skipper hugged Private. "You're cute when you're startled."

Private looked disgruntled as he stepped back from the embrace. "Ley line? There are actual lines to get laid? Do we need to take a number?"

Skipper fell apart before he marched away from the glowing structure and ascended four steps. "Gross thought. I must be rubbing off on you."

"Maybe later."

"That's punny."

"I thought so."

"Oh you kidder, you! Come on, see the niche beside the wall sconce?" Skipper pointed to a crevice five feet up. "Penguin size, just for you and me. Let's explore where humans can't go."

The niche stayed its nichiest for fifty feet and then opened to a medium sized chamber, rose red flowstone walls with broad yellow stripes rippling through. The space was pleasant except for its odor.

Skipper plugged his nostrils. "Led's bove alog. Yellow beans sulfur."

"Sbells lieg Rico ad is sbelliest," Private agreed.

Sixty feet from the stinky room, a more congenial atmosphere presented itself. This room's jagged ceiling continued laterally to the end of their Maglite's range not more than four feet high, which
would have been challenging for a human to explore. They waddled slowly over obstructing stalagmites and wove through smooth boulders deposited by long ago floods. Private reached the farthest wall first.

"Look, Skippa, bacon!"

"Great day in the morning, it is!" Wallapering the chamber flowed red brown minerals mingled with whitish strips to resemble the tasty breakfast dish. "It's lunchtime, right? Let's eat." Privated consulted Kowalski's smartphone. "It's just eleven, Skippa."

"So it's Sunday brunch. Lighten up and unload the Howe chow, now." Skipper plotzed and flourished an imaginary fork and knife. "Told you I'd work up an appetite."

Private got coy. "We'll eat if I can make a game of it."

"Never get between a penguin and his anchovies, Private," Skipper glowered. "And anchovies make poor playing cards."

Private opened the tin of tiny fish. He pulled one from its net, swaying it back and forth in front of Skipper's glittering and hungry eyes. "It's not that sort of game. Listen, honey: he loves me, he loves me not," he chanted.

"It's not a game if everyone knows the result. Come on, I'm starving, babe." Skipper patted his substantial belly. "Wasting away over here. Feed me, Seymour."

"Oh all right, partypooper. Here, catch." Private tossed the anchovy, which Skipper caught adroitly. He caught the next eleven, too.

Private passed the tin to his love. "There's about eleven left, so you do me now."

Skipper's eyes glittered with another kind of appetite. "I want to, but shall I? Will I? Can you think of one good reason to play?" He waggled an anchovy, which Private's gaze followed as if hypnotized. "Hungry?"

"D-Did you need Gammel Dansk, Skippa? It's back at camp." Private continued to track the fishlet. "So's that, er, other item." The fish wiggled suggestively. "And its goopy accessory thingy."

"Eat and I'll show you what I do and do not need." Skipper turned off his Maglite before it, too, frazzled and dimmed. Private's Maglite provided a beam that ricocheted upon the bacon to produce two candlepowers of light. "Cozier now, right?"

Private accepted the next twelve anchovies without breaking his gaze. Together, the two birds replenished energy to settle into more serious and at the same time, more frivolous undertakings. "You know, Skippa, when we might be drowned penguins or fried penguins the next tippy-toppiest nannysecond, I understood about sex."

"You did?"

"Righto. Remember back in October when you said if Blowhole flooded the whole bleedin' world, the last thing you'd think before drownin' was I got some before I died?"

"I said that?"

"The very words."
"Er. Um. I don't recall saying that to you, Private, but I did dream that I said it to you. Are you sure you didn't dream it?"

The word *mystic* tickled Private's lower brain. "N-No, I'm not, but it sure seems I did hear you." He pursued the agenda of the day. "Either way, it's okay because it was truer than true. I got you before I got killed and I would have died happy."

"L-Likewise, babe, likewise." Someplace far away a drip splashed and its echoes started a chain reaction, or so it seemed. The whole effect was mystical.

"Well, Skip." "Well, Private." "Shall we get to it?"

"More wooing. More eating." They raced through the final two tins of anchovies.

Sixteen kisses and five gropes later, they began.

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Solemnly, Skipper placed the three emptied tins in a Mercedes-Benz logo formation. "Oil is practical for you and me. We've got oil galore."

Private nodded, beyond speech. He shivered and shut his eyes as Skipper anointed him from the slurry of oil lingering in each tin. After a long and quiet time, Private opened his eyes.

"You have oil," Skipper said, pointing. "Just there."

Skipper leaned in close, softly kissing Private's neck, and licked the offending oil.

"Skippa," Private nearly groaned. He curled his flippers into fists.

"Yes, Private?" Skipper didn't stop nibbling Private's neck.

Private dipped his flipper into the oil. "You've got some here." He smeared a glob on Skipper's adam's apple and then lower, spreading it down his lover's chest. A smirk played on both their beaks.

"And some here." Skipper dotted Private's keelbone with shine. "And let's not forget there, as well." A heavy drop of oil hung from each taut thigh. Private stared down at it, breathing fast.

Private sucked his flippers as clean as he could, slightly gritty as they were. He gripped himself first before Skipper could. "Fish oil works, I s'pose. Did you know, Skippa" - he wanked softly as if milking Nannygoat's tender, longsuffering teat - "or would you be surprised, that is, that Marlene wanted to sculpt me?"

"You're a handsome penguin, so no." Skipper strengthened Private's grip, adjusting to Private's rhythm.

"Oh, yeah. She offered to craft an anatomically correct dildo."

"Wh-What? Marlene did?" Skipper's grasp flopped to his lap and he sucked in air. "So. What did you say?" He replaced his flippers around the slowly moving action.

Private growled, "You bloody well know wot I said."
"How would I know - you and she are friends like she and I are friends oh no you're not making me diss our mutual friend - don't go there -" Skipper continued to shadow the movements without touching his own excitement. "I changed my mind and neither need nor wish to know because it might be a secret waiting for me after we get home. I don't like to spoil someone's uhhn fun."

Skipper resolved to upgrade Private's waffling skills after the next response. "Nobody else in our zoo could sculpt, not even Burt at his artiest. She said it would take three modelin' sessions. She's generous with her time, Marlene is."

"Yes. To a fault." Skipper did a double take. "Three?"

"Don't stop like that, I like you doin' wot you're doin'. No, nobody else. I said no thanks, because animals can just be too nice, you know?"

Skipper couldn't contain his glee as he freed one flipper for his own use, stroking briskly. "I knew it! I knew you'd stay just as sweet as you are!"

Private wanked faster. "H-How would modelin' make me not sweet?" He leaned closer, his beak brushing the finely-feathered indent of Skipper's earhole as he blew into it. Skipper looked down at what one of his own flippers occupied itself with, determining for the first time how Private compared to Marlene's dildo. Never mind the girth, it had to be at least ... why hadn't he ever noticed that good things came in big packages, too ... Swallowing, he glanced up, his eyes meeting Private's. Private did not smile. Private did not look away. Skipper swallowed again as he ignored Private's question.

"Good job you practiced with Faux Me, Private. You may choose the position this time."

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Private felt as if his brain moved in slow motion, having spent the morning twenty-five percent marinated in dirty fantasies involving Skipper. It didn't help to see Skipper wanking now with both flippers, a little smirk in place as the two oiled appendages slip slapped up and down and twisted. Choose the position? Him, against his love's vaster knowledge and experience? Two minutes passed without a reply coming to mind. This was not one of his fantasies, this was really happening. Skipper gently steered him out of his daydream.

"I expect you know my preferences by now, but this is your time to shine. Surprise me."

As if the pressure didn't exist, Private found his voice. Every shaky breath he took gave way to, "I'm goin' to make every fantasy you've had look rated 15 before you and I depart Bacon Room."

Before Skipper had time to come up with a wisecrack, Private abandoned himself to slide firm flippers down Skipper's chest, rotating twin circles where nipples would be if penguins had them. Skipper gasped and kept on wanking, pupils dilating until the ring of color was nearly invisible. Skirting down below, Private teased the cockhead before settling around it to demolish Skipper's self control. The commander thrust forward with a hiss as Mama Nature's best scenario engulfed them.

Private kept up squeezing and relaxing in a set rhythm until Skipper got out of sync. No, no, not so soon, thought Private, you're out of practice and there's ever so much more we can do. Let me save us some more. He pushed Skipper bodily to his back and straddled his thighs, much the better option for pressing hungry kisses against the beak that welcomed him inside. Skipper arched up to return the kisses with force, opening wide to swipe his tongue far to the back.

"Urk, s-stop," choked Private and Skipper obeyed. Private considered that his gag reflex might kick
in with an upchuck that would kill any penguin's romantic mood no matter how enthusiastic. He stalled until returning to a personal favorite fantasy. Without speaking, he dismounted, slid to his side and raised one leg, dipping an oily flippertip inside himself to tickle and swirl. He closed his eyes to present surroundings, swimming inside his mind to give a little talent show all his own. He hummed *Let Me Entertain You* as he breathed out slowly, still circling. He snatched a sharp breath as a tentative flipper slid beside his. The movements were careful and measured, eking a squeak from him as his eyes snapped open to reveal Skipper watching his every move.

Skipper's voice urged, "Relax." Then a third flipper entered the opening, which felt awkward and uncomfortable. Not even hot kisses against his neck made him forget about it entirely. Private considered that some things were just too much fun and disengaged before he got overwhelmed.

But the moment all flippers were withdrawn and Skipper moved to grasp Private's cock again, Private forgot everything. He doubted he could keep two thoughts straight in his head while that muscular grip slid up and down, but at such a time, he couldn't care less. The fewer thoughts, the better, he decided, until a lick circled his opening before Skipper asked a tentative question.

"This - This is what you want? You're sure?"

For a long moment, Private gazed up at the bird who had been his friend, commander, colleague and for months now, the subject of multiple fantasies he'd never before dared. He reached up to pull Skipper down for a long, lingering kiss that tasted of anchovies.

"Roll over, then," Skipper said quietly. He turned Private over as Rico would turn over bacon so as not to burn it. Private rolled like a breakfast blintz in sizzling butter to present his butt for attention. The familiar warmth and weight of the older bird against his back reminded Private of so many missions when his team had hustled or had been hustled inside zippered mesh bags, steel barred cells, and FedEx boxes that the nostalgia made him limp and dreamy.

Skipper nibbled at the dark and dirty feathers at the nape of Private's neck. Suddenly Private wondered how much blood could possibly be left in the rest of his body as his cock sprang back to life with the way that one of Skipper's experienced flippers slipped under his belly to wrap like a vise around him. Private remained so wrapped up in this delight that he was shocked when Skipper thrust in from behind. He gasped as honed strength gripped him by one shoulder to pull him closer as Skipper pushed again and again and once more as he gained traction. He became much more aware of Skipper: the rough brush of beak against his jaw, the urgent breaths by his earhole, the flare of pleasure that surged and faded with each push against his bottom.

"Faster," Private begged in a voice as rough as Skipper's had been last night. Skipper obliged. Faster and harder, too, came pushes and jerks on his cock almost to the point of pain. Two harsh breaths grew uneven as Private looked forward to mutual comes and how rare and precious was that?

Before either bird could release, Skipper shocked him again. He pulled out with a long sigh, declining to encourage himself or Private with so much as a flick against straining flesh. Skipper lay at Private's side to pant and fling one flipper possessively over his love's chest.

"You do me, instead."

Oh oh oh, those were the precise words he'd said their first real time together and Private barked an "Aye aye!" before sitting up. Never mind that it wasn't supposed to have happened this way, that Private meant to be the bad boy this time, the one seducing, and yet here he was, the one seated on rock that resembled bacon as both of them fried in anchovy oil.

"Shabu shabu!" Private cried and by Skipper's breathless chuckle, he knew that Skipper remembered
their Kidsmas dinner date in back of Sushi Yasuda on 43rd and Third. Private sizzled like the nabemono had as he drew Skipper astride his lap and plunged deep. They came nearly at once as Skipper bounced up and down, with Private letting out a low cry as he thrust upward and Skipper layering hot seed onto their patina of silt, lube, and anchovy oil.
"Do you hear water, Skippa?"

Skipper looked up from massaging Private's left pinkie toe. "You, too? I thought it was wishful thinking."

Private extracted his toe with a grateful look. "Thanks ever so, I got a cramp in it from doin' wot we did." He flexed his feet with a small wince. "Feels a tad better. Mmmm, think I'll rest a bit more."

Skipper stretched into a Tai Chi Golden Rooster Stands On One Leg for six reps and came down into Hold The Ball. "Little nap was just what I needed. You stay put and I'll explore. If you hear a scream, use your own judgment. If it's a scream of joy, come running towards me. If it's a scream of fear, run the other way. Got it?"

"As if I'd desert under fire, pffhhht."

"I'll make it an order if I must. I don't want to since we're on vacation, but -"

"Code words to holler when we're out of each other's sight, then? Routine Thirty-Two?"

"Confuse and Distract works for everything that we can handle above ground but under the ground, it's all a crapshoot. No, Routine Fifteen: Find Cover Fast. Shit gets real, penguins find cover and regroup. Them's my orders, er, firm suggestions."

Private regarded his toe. "I don't know, my health is compromised with my ickle bitty toe hurtin'. I am not hearin' too well, either, maybe it's all your moanin' -"

"I'm leaving. My orders stand. Over and out." Skipper took the brighter of the two Maglites and sidled, commando-like, towards the dripping sound. He disappeared behind a strip of cave bacon, extra crispy.

IOIOIOIOIOIO

It took some squeezing through fifty feet of narrow tunnel, but on the far side of an expanse filled with a carton of one dozen thundereggs and a full rasher of cave bacon spouted enough water trickling off a stalactite to call it a shower. Flowstone draped around the stalactite to term it a stall and the water drained through a penny-wide crack beneath his feet. The experience was delicious as smoked salmon, thought Skipper, as he twirled like a pretty little ballerina underneath the spray. He washed his pits, his feet, and everything in between. He saved his head and neck for last.

"Oh man, that felt good. Oh man." His voice echoed in the shower stall. "Echo!"

"Echo!" answered the shower.

"I love you, Private!"

"I love you, Private!" came the reply. Now that he was squeaky clean, he danced like an Egyptian back to where Private waited as he spun his Maglite in ecstatic spirals. He spied Private reclining just like Kowalski had when the scientist tried to seduce the Blue Hen with sexy dance moves that Skipper hadn't realized his lieutenant had in him. Skipper jumped a little at seeing Private in the same pose before he shook off the surprise.
"Guess what? Water ahead, boyo! We can refill the canteen, too. Don't faint from pleasure. Save that for later. No more stickies, no more dirt, no more nothing."

No reply, either. Private had fallen asleep with his head on his crooked elbow, aw wasn't that sweet? Damn, the diluted minerals in the cave water must have misted his eyes. Skipper swiped them and bent down low. "Reveille, Private," he husked.

Nothing was more adorable this side of the Eternally Foggy Sea than Private's yawn, blink and stretch. "Eh? Wot's up?"

"A shower, babe, an actual honest to the Endless Iceberg shower, as refreshing as the one in our HQ, just not as warm. Come on, I'll carry you."

By Clara Barton's meatwagon, Private's toe needed pampering and Skipper was just in the mood to cosset. It helped that nobody else was around to see him princess carry Private through the narrow passage and set him down under the spray. Private artfully tossed the Maglite he'd been toting to land it pointed towards them. Muted photons spotlighted the pair as if they played in spring rain puddles.

"Honey, I'm in heaven. Join me?"

"Always."

Private submitted to being scrubbed like a baby on back and nape of neck before turning face to face with Skipper. It didn't seem the time to giggle, so neither did. As solemn as church mice, they slicked every feather, every claw and every beak clean as Alice's zoo cart after she hosed it weekly to follow up with a Simoniz wax job. To Skipper, it seemed impossible that he could love this bird any more than he did yesterday, but he did.

A warning gonged in his head as they preened each other, nuzzling glands, stroking waterproofing oil through chest and belly feathers, down muscular thighs and shapely shins, and back up to pure white throats. Happy? Sure, he was happy. Was anyone from his romantic past around to curb his happiness? Kitka? Doris? Araceli? Juana? Fanny? Anyone?

His gut reminded him that well, no, he'd never gotten it on with Fanny, that's right. Her sister, Estrellita, now that was another matter. Estrellita had worn him to a blissed out nubbin just by being, well, Estrellita. Bouvet Island probably registered a whump on the nearest Richter scale when they -

"Skippa, I declare us clean."

"Me, too. I love you, Private." Skipper resolved that this would be the last time he'd say this today, Sunday the 18th of March. No use getting into the habit of repeating a mishmush of what everyone knew, anyway. Everyone in the HQ, that is. And Marlene. Nobody else, he was certain of it. He'd never given anyone like busybody Pinky or gossip Burt cause to suspect the romances going on at the penguin habitat. Hmmm, he'd better remind Rico and Kowalski when he got back that covert operations remained their standard.

The water felt incredibly good, borderline perfect. The dimmed Maglite provided the best light ever for a rhapsody, reverie, or rapture, Skipper wasn't sure which. He didn't often indulge in them and Private always seemed to be around when he did.

An hour later they were back in bed at the Bronze Anteroom, bathed, fluffed and dried on a late afternoon. Such riches to be able to rest when they felt like it! Private snuggled into Skipper's belly and turned off the Maglite. He muttered something sleepily.

"Mmm. Yeah, babe. Me, too."
A mumbled *say it* broke the mood.

"I did say it," Skipper affirmed.

A *whuff*.

Skipper sighed, exasperated enough to growl, "Saying 'me too' is the same thing as saying it."

A much crankier mutter.

"Oh look, we feel too good. Just go to sleep, okay?"

Private subsided with a loving phrase and settled back down.

"Yeah, babe, me too."

A while later, soft snores came from their blankets. "Private, are you awake? Private?"

More *hbhbhbhbhbees*.

Feathers rustled gently against a tender touch. "You know, I do love you," said Skipper under his breath.

A delighted *wheeee* filled the air.

"Private, put me down, that's cheating!" Skipper said in outrage. "You were supposed to be asleep!"

A soft thud was followed by whispering on the blankets.

Private made a contented noise that Skipper echoed.

"Yeah, me too. Now get some sleep. And hey, don't forget to inventory what we used on the trip before we leave tomorrow."

But from the other side of the blanket there came only the slow, even breathing of a young commando drifting off to sleep.

**IOIOIOIOIO**

It may have been two hours, it may have been five hours later that Skipper awoke with morning wood. He played with himself after rising to get rid of one third canteen of water. He tilted his head to gather information from Mama Nature and all he could determine was that the atmosphere possessed that middle of the night flatness in the dark hours before dawn. He could have consulted Kowalski's smartphone for the hour, but why bring tech into such a peaceful, natural time? He knew that above him, stalactites extended downwards all unseen, slivers of crystal bright against the velvety dress of the bronze flowstone. No longer did they seem threats, but jewels in his treasure house of memory, jewels to string on the necklace of a life well lived.

An artistic thought, Skipper? Are you channeling Kitka and her throwing a clay pot on the pottery wheel or are you channeling Private flashing his knitting needles? He shivered at needles and switched to contemplating Kitka. She was only a flicker in his mind's eye; she had been important to him once. Guilt over how quickly she had disappeared lasted until Private stirred beside him and ended abruptly the moment Private grasped his slowly moving elbow.

Skipper moaned and flung back his head when Private tugged his commander's flipper off the hardness. Skipper clenched and unclenched the blankets, panting as Private raised Skipper's leg to sweetly infiltrate the place that demanded attention with a questing flippertip. With a cry, Skipper
mourned when Private abandoned the touches to dump Hello Kitty's contents. It must have been only one minute that Private neglected him but it seemed like the entire sultry month of August passed when Private snatched the last of Frances Alberta's large candles, four of the birthday cake sized candles, and six of the glowsticks. He lit the candles and snapped the glowsticks. They sounded like Fourth of July firecrackers.

We're going patriotic, thought Skipper as the large candle dispersed the scent of cardamom. All right! Plus we'll save on the Maglites! Excelente, Private! Skipper stroked lightly to keep up momentum, ignoring Private's excitement which remained tepid. That was okay because it was Skipper who felt on the cusp of full recovery from his imp- er, improbable problem. Private resumed his attentions by thrusting aside his commander's flippers in a not-quite-pushy fashion, replacing Skipper's wanking with his own that had grown in confidence during the last two days.

Private planted a flowery path of kisses from chin to groin. He groaned along with Skipper when lifting one of his love's legs high, the better to see the path of a good long lick followed by a tickle followed by a sly taking of the beachhead. The place where tongue thrust into flesh gleamed in the candlelight in a way no calcite could.

Skipper flopped his leg bonelessly onto Private's head. Gah he said or maybe it was Guh when Private took hold of himself with his unoccupied flipper, his fist pumping in time with the rocking of Skipper's hips.

Skipper anchored himself on the blankets and sucked in air, moving faster. Free as a pretty little songbird, Private's tongue disengaged and his laughter echoed throughout the Bronze Anteroom, rolling around and around as much as the two of them did when Skipper's anchor came loose. Wild and exultant, Private's laughter continued until he commanded, "Dance!" before dipping inside his love again.

Saying the word appeared to send Private over the edge because Private's body tightened, he stabbed deeper and then when Skipper's body tugged on him like a hungry mouth, he scattered ten pearls atop Skipper's pecs.

With a shudder and groan, Skipper closed his eyes. He remained on the cusp, his body relaxing, his cock slackening. Not yet, not yet, Private, I still need you to - hold on. Who's the commander here? As usual, it all comes down to me, the skipper, and I shall and will dance.

Skipper kept his eyes closed as he pushed Private away from him. No, he didn't need help to do this. He had his own fire. He dipped into Private's cum, ran through several fantasies before deciding on one and gave a preliminary arch before starting feather light touches on a struggling cock.

Private rolled to the far side of the blanket, watching.

"Well, Skippa, you got your subterranean combat yesterday, happy now?"

How come the mellow afterglow of getting one's rocks off faded so fast? Crankiness infused the words and Skipper couldn't figure Private out. They'd both been jittery after the Zombie-Alberta Incident, but Private's state of nerves lasted longer than it ought. He resolved to weather the latest emotional storm because really, it wasn't worth him grilling the younger bird over reasons to be touchy. He admitted to looking forward to the end of their vacation despite its success in vital areas. Vacations meant that sometimes birds spent too much time together without the comfort of routine. He considered witnessing the mighty mecha, the amazing glimpse of Frances Alberta and her defeat which had been aided by her buddy, the Hunchback of Howe Caverns. He considered the pleasant shower amid the splendor of Howe and how faithfully Private had attempted to help him just now. He concluded, "Yes. I am. Next question?"
Private stood up and fluffed his feathers in irritation so fast they made a *fwomp* noise. "Three times is all I'm gettin'? That's it? Are we goin' to have another go or not? I've been waitin' forever for the hiatus to end, crikey, and just three times isn't enough - "

It took an effort of will not to fluff his own feathers. Skipper resolved to make light of the situation as he stood up, too, entranced by Private's youthful ability to go twice in quick succession. The half-filled cock peeping from between Private's tense thighs said it all. "Bull Halsey's bollocks, so I still float your boat? Good to know." Honey dripped from his voice. "You turn me on, babe, too. Care to elucidate your new technique again? You got me all, er, gobsmacked and the instructions ran in one earhole and out the other." He turned his back on Private and wiggled his butt. Private made an impatient noise as he spread the blankets next to a goodly sized boulder.

"Oh, for the love of - Skippa! It's just another routine to learn!" Private flounced down and pulled Skipper onto his lap. "Here! Now lean back between my legs."

Mentally, Skipper scrambled to be the learner rather than the instructor. "I can't do this without you."

Private's bluster continued. Skipper wondered if his love were thinking *how would Skippa sound.* It would seem so. "Clear your mind of everythin', but don't blank your eyes like Rico does because I couldn't stand it." Fantasies spun between them in a whirlpool leading to a dark cave of pleasure and it didn't matter who started the whole shebang; these were outstanding images.

Skipper closed his eyes as scene after scene washed over him. Godfrey Daniel, these were great! He began to squirm and cranked his eyelids apart despite himself. The birthday candles had burned out before the glowsticks, but Frances Alberta's large candle's illumination displayed their shadows twisting on the nearest stalagmites' facets. Private grabbed Skipper's cock and Skipper's eyes opened wider after a prolonged *hisssssss.* Private's shadow form magnified to a surreal size as Skipper's mind was officially blown.

Now the tone turned bossy. "Do wot I tell you when I tell you to do it." Private yanked roughly at Skipper's cock with his left flipper as he pressed his back against the boulder. "Open your eyes all the way! Look at what I'm doin' and you do the same." Skipper braced himself with one flipper on Private's thigh as the other grasped Private's sliding purveyor of pleasure.

"Guh," said Skipper, his initial smirk at his submissive words evaporating. Why, he'd regained his momentum with no problem, good on him. "So close - "

Private sensed his love's remnant of distraction as Skipper's flipper trembled atop his. He added a twist at the top of the stroke. "Focus, Skippa! Or I won't finish it!"

"Focusing n-now! *Ugghn!*" Skipper would come or die in the next five seconds. He decided to come as his last fully coherent thought. His back slapped against Private's chest, safely held as the action intensified.

A cylinder stirred against Skipper's backside.

"Let me finish," Private growled after he mouthed open the lube's cap. "Right quick-like! Oh bother, I can't do this with only one flipper!"

Skipper shot back to complete consciousness to take over wanking as the dildo appeared in front of him. Private whipped it behind Skipper's back. "Um, wait a minute. What's the safe word?"

"Partypooper!" chirped Private.

"That's too long*ahhhhh!"
Through the haze of sex, Skipper barely registered the separate incidents: the caresses, the loosening, the positioning on all fours. It was true, the lube and the lust eased the entry and hey, he'd done this before. Skipper's stomach fluttered with thrill after thrill after the first stockstill minute of getting used to the feel of plastic again. He drooped, his cheek hit the blanket and he sighed as his thoughts centered on the one place in his body that opened to receive help when he needed it most. With the entry came the realization that Private would never let him down. "That's it, you're gettin' it, take it all, yes."

He felt Private rock the thing backwards until there was nothing left in Skipper, he heard a moment of fumbling, a squeal and then Private surged forward with the relubed dildo. Skipper crumpled in the contemplation of success in this mission cum vacation as he got shoved so that his head lopped over the blanket onto the gravel. He thought that if Private turned on the thing's vibrator, he'd come apart.

Skipper's beak scratched into the silt mixed into the gravel and he couldn't help his body's reaction. It was as natural as anything ever got.

"Huhuhuhskwapf!" Skipper lurched upward on wobbly flippers as Private pushed him six more inches in his eagerness to succeed in his task.

"Ahhhhshropppf!" After his impo-er, temporary crisis when he was not physically superior to all his men - became a thing of the unlamented past, Skipper would remember this cavern with gratitude.

"Guhhwoozle!"

Private paused because he had to. He couldn't move the dildo without fear of damage. Did Skipper know how tight that sneezes would make him? He was sure that his love would think the progress was too good to lose and the next words confirmed it. "Again, Private!"

"Must follow orders, oh, if I can't, wot will he do? Wot will we do?" Private wasn't certain if he said his thoughts aloud. The smell of sex in the dank cavern and the gasps of pleasure added a driving rhythm to the atmosphere. He noticed that Skipper wasn't even trying to hold in sneezes now.

"Ooohpahplllshbll!"

Private changed position, arching backwards against the boulder as he maneuvered Skipper as he would a large stringed instrument, splaying the legs to either side of his own hips and strumming the heaving chest. Private reached around but instead of going for the usual spot, he angled his flipper upward and tickled Skipper's right nostril.

"Yes!" was Skipper's shout through Howe Caverns, powerful enough to make Private harden fully. He had the ultimate satisfaction of realizing his love hardened to the bursting point, too, as he gentled out the dildo and changed positions with a "Now!" Skipper spun around in Private's grip and the two birds rolled together as they had in the torrent that pulled them down deep on St. Urho's Day. Private knelt and gasped when the never to be forgotten feeling of being breached repeated itself. Skipper seemed to know that fast is best in these circumstances and came after eight uneven thrusts. Almost as an afterthought, Private came, too.

"I ... you ... uh, good work, Private!" Skipper flopped sideways and Private rolled away from him, grunting as they parted company. The stalactites glinted in the guttering candlelight and all was right in the world.
Chapter 56

Alice was the only person Filo knew to combine a scowl with a smile. "An Oscar The Grouch trash can plushie? So thoughtful, Filo. You know, I got over my trashcan thing a long time ago."

"I didn't know. I'll exchange it." Filo reached for the plushie to place it back into the gift bag.

Alice stroked the green grouch. "Nah, it's a reminder of where I was and where I am now. No fairy tale romances ever again. I'm happy inside, Filo." She fingered the Go Away! sticker on Oscar's front.

Filo considered that Alice neared the end of her tolerance for socializing since the party began at 10:30 and it was now ninety minutes later. It was longer chitchatting than Alice had endured in the three years Filo had known her. Honestly, they had bonded over mild mutual griping about their jobs that neither wanted to quit; that is, quit neither the griping nor the jobs.

"Chica! You've changed!"

"Well, not too much so you don't know me, right?"

"I want to know you better, Ms. Nelson. I really do."

Alice shrugged. "I'm going to be busy, but yeah, sure, come by anytime. I'll be home for six weeks starting in June and we can hang out."

"I can help you, too." Filo didn't think she could help helping, and with Alice the way she was, that proved a challenge sometimes. Alice leaned her shoulder into Filo's companionably before straightening up onto the austere couch's back cushions.

"That's nice of you. We'll have fun, uh don't tell anyone else, okay? I mean, I don't want Scooter Alvarez to find out about my you know what."

"Why? And I hardly ever see him anymore. We're through."

"So he's up for grabs?"

Filo bounced her curls with her left hand as she nabbed a snickerdoodle from the coffee table with her right. "He doesn't like grabs. You have to be sneaky to give one or to get one."

"You know what I mean."

"Uh huh, okay, if I run into Scooter covering a soccer match I'll tell him you're interested. But girlfriend, some guys like the situation you're in because it turns them on, and he can't help but see - "

"What I said, Filo."

"Si, si, jajaja. Bomboncita, anything for you right now."

"Hey, instant gratification! I could get used to this."

"I'm a cop. I don't do instant."

"I'm a zookeeper. I have to every day or I get trampled by stupid animals."
"What lives we lead, yes?"

Filo noticed Alice take stock of her loot like she supposed she did taking zoo inventory, ticking off items on her fingers. One trash can plushie, fifteen dozen Huggies in pastel plastic, two zebra-striped onesies, three awesome Alex The Lion knit caps with honey-colored manes, a khaki denim boba baby wrap, and ten bottles accompanied by three packets of rubber nipples. From what Alice blurted twenty minutes ago, Filo didn't think she'd be needing the bottles and nipples.

"Things are going right at the moment, Scooter or no Scooter, Filo." Alice turned abruptly to the only guest at her baby shower since Doc and his wife, Kavita, and Maurice The Zookeeper and his girlfriend departed. "Would you do what I did to get a baby?"

Filo cringed before she made herself stop. "I, I don't think so. I'm not that brave."

"Sure you are. You're New York's Finest." The following snort sounded pure Alice.

"I'm not brave about getting a procedure done like you did. I'm scared of - "

"You scared?"

"Say, listen, Alice, I've been shot with a .22, bitten by a toddler whose life I saved, sideswiped by a runaway Kharmann Ghia and I've done time, as a hospital patient I mean. No more if I can help it." Filo polished off her snickerdoodle and headed for the front door of the upstairs apartment.

"Oh. I didn't know. Hey, that's tough, Filo, but mine was only outpatient stuff. You should have been there when they made me do something whackadoo right at the moment of - "

"Stop! I, I, uh, maybe I'll tell you my stories when I visit you after the baby comes. Gotta go now, keed."

Alice grunted as she stood up to shuffle to the kitchen with heavy tread. She fetched a clingy length of SaranWrap to protect the green tea cake plate beside the cookie plate. "Take these for your familia, I'll just nibble until it's gone and that's a no no, says Doc."

Filo accepted both plates. "Thanks, see you around the zoo!"

"I'm moving in permanently, thanks to Doc talking to the Powers That Be. Pervis says it's okay."

Filo's eyes widened to resemble the unwrapped bottoms of two chocolate kisses. "Pervis? McSlade lets you call him by his first name?"

"Ever since I made salaried employee, yeah, what about it?"

"I wouldn't think of calling my boss by his first name, and it's less weird than Pervis."

"I'm lucky then, point for me!" Alice made a sliding gesture with a forefinger as if to maneuver a pool hall's scorekeeper tab to the left. "The police force must be more formal than us zookeepers." Her tone became less confrontational and Filo decided to go while the going was good. They could compare jobs in the public sector forever, and she didn't have forever. Swing shift began in four hours.

Filo surveyed the place. "Kitchen looks all right, but there's just a sitting area so it's all one big room with no separate bedroom. You're okay with that? Baby stuff takes up a lot of space." Who's set to do child care when you go back to work, Alice? What will happen when the kid goes to school and kids, no, brats, ask where the daddy is? Of all my friends, you were the least likely to use artificial
insemination. Huh.

Alice plotzed on the sofa. She pointed to a sunny southern corner. "Crib there, behind a screen." She bounced once. "This is a sofa bed, comfy enough for me."

"So the nighttime keeper - "

Alice shrugged once more and Filo saw her friend's blasé attitude as evidence that Alice, indeed, had not changed down deep. "He has his own place, always has. Maurice and his girlfriend, what's her name - "

"Valerie MacLaine."

"Heh, yeah, you're a cop to remember names so good, well, Maurice and Valerie live someplace in Jersey, I dunno where. Doc wouldn't live here on a bet."

Filo juggled her plates as she slapped her designer jean pockets. "Keys, wallet, good to go. Bye for now, Alice. Enjoy living here, eh? Won't the noise bother you from the café?"

Alice waved airily from her place on the sofa. The khaki maternity smock overflowed her maternity Dockers and the only touch of color was an orange Invader Zim headband restraining her auburn hair, undone from its prosaic bun to flow down her back. Filo had thought Alice appeared matronly before her pregnancy and her present condition cemented Filo's opinion. Too bad Alice couldn't be happier in her work, though. Filo considered that she herself was a schosche happier person.

"Café noise, no. If those penguins get up to hijinks at night, then yeah. Otherwise, I think I'll - we'll - be good." Alice looked embarrassed. "Thanks for thinking about me, Filo. Old Grandpa Admiral raised me to look after myself. I miss him."

"Mi familia es grande, Alice. Come by the Bronx anytime."

Alice waved Oscar's green padded paw in Filo's direction, or maybe it was a padded hand. "O-Okay. 'Bye, already. Excuse me for not getting up. It's like hoisting a derrick to get out of this sofa."

"I can imagine. 'Bye."

Kowalski struggled under Rico's shime-waza. He kicked backwards, he kicked upwards, he kicked sideways, but Rico knew all his moves and countered them. Rico hauled his love backwards ten feet from the zoo apartment's air conditioning grille. "Ahgrommtznao. 'Kippaaahreportdun."

Kowalski wheezed when Rico released him. "Why'd you do that? I can control myself!"

Rico shook his head. Mondays were tough enough without having to body slam Kowalski at straight up noon. "Loud."

"Oh I was not. You're imagining things." Kowalski chortled. "But did you hear all that, Rico? Alice is pregnant! My stars and garters!"

"Yahpregz."

"Preggers is right! Won't Skipper fall apart with the news? And Private will faint. Be ready to catch him, Rico."

Rico nodded. "Yahkay." He toboganned for the outlet of the duct to the great outdoors. "Yahgo."
Kowalski followed, deep in thought. "So as a zookeeper, she is used to artificial insemination, the concept of no l-l-love for getting a baby, fascinating - "

Rico inched through the open grille at the back of the building, scouting around for spying eyes, before he plunged to the dumpster lid below. He braced himself as Kowalski dropped two stories into Rico's grip without the scientist mentioning that on each Monday designated by Parks Commissioner Pervis McSlade as Funday, the zoo campaigned to fill its sparse early week population. Today was no different, with attendance up slightly and humans feeding their faces at lunchtime. The Zoo Café proved a minefield of human legs and gobbling pigeons to dodge as they navigated in stealth mode. Cadging a fallen piece of popcorn from a bird that looked like Frankie but he couldn't tell a pigeon apart from any other, Rico guided his overthinking friend back to their lair. It was time to hustle Faux Skipper and Plushie Private down the hatch and take over with realistic penguin action. He cared not a whit that Alice was pregnant, but he saw that Kowalski did. Eh, science science science. "Notfurme," he muttered.

Kowalski sounded on Cloud Nine as he took up position on their island. "A baby, a little squirmer, nine miles' worth of cute, Rico - "

Rico banged down the hatch cover. "WakiesnaoKwoskii."

With an unfocused glaze to his eyes, Kowalski dove into their water as he crooned, "Let Daddy teach you to swim, darling."

Rico phpfpbphpbpbled a raspberry and dove in after him. He tugged Kowalski's tail to upend him before pecking him in the shin. Kowalski didn't seem to feel the poke and sank to the bottom, still grinning like a fool. Rico blew exasperated bubbles and evaded returning to their faux floe, pushing his personal best time underwater until he rose to hear Kowalski cooing as he had to Jiggles' Jigglei. "Ittle dirl wuv er daddykins? Eeserdo! Ittle boy wuv iz pop-pop? Esshedo!"

Rico circled their island eight times more before plotzing beside Kowalski as the scientist beached himself in the thin March sun. "Kwoskii."

"Yeeeeees, lover?"

"Shaddap."

Kowalski harrumphed. "I can't help it if you're nonverbal about babies, Rico. I'm not." He sighed happily. "We'll get to see it grow because it will live with us. I don't care that it's human."

"Kwoskii, Jigglei."

"All right, I see your point. Yes, I admit I went overboard with nurturing Jiggles' offspring and we got overwhelmed by sheer numbers. One human baby is different."

Rico patted Kowalski's chest as he channeled his strength into speaking as clear as, well, any other penguin. "Heartbreak."

"So? I'm a scientist. I'll Gorilla Glue it back together. Come on, Rico, I'll only observe. It's exciting in a scientific, not a personal sense. It's not even as involving as Makaliporn was."

"Promise?"

"Pinky swear, er, I mean yes, I swear."

Rico relaxed. "Gud. Whenzeyback?"
"Skipper mentioned today at some non-specific point, why?"

Rico shrugged. "Missem."

"We've teamed so long that it takes separate vacations to make us treasure each other all the more no don't look gassy I'm through with what mush I had to say. There. Done."

Rico pushed Kowalski back into the water as a reply.

"Leave behind the shoes, sox and anything else that stinks. Let the humans puzzle out how the stuff got here, if they ever come into the Anteroom. I always like to leave a little mystery behind me."

Monday morning in Howe Caverns was like any other Monday morning, thought Skipper, as he watched Private take inventory of what to pack in Hello Kitty. "Two blankets to cram into you, Pussy, two jars of Pacific oysters complete with gloop, one full canteen, one smartphone, six matches, a weird horsey tail flyswatter from weird Frances Alberta and her weird pal, Marlene's drawing, one quarter-full bottle of Gammel Dansk, and finally - "

"One dildo with b-batteries and accompanying lube," chimed in Skipper. "See, I can say it now."

"That's one small step for a bird, one giant step for - "

"Oh shut up."

"Aye, sir. Hello, wot's this?" Private poked at the very bottom of the backpack to shinny inside a flap. He extracted a Christmas cracker. "It's far from St. Knut's Day, wot was Marlene thinkin'? First a drawin', then a cracker."

Skipper held out his flipper and Private dropped the red and green foiled cracker into it. The commander examined the cylinder. "That girl," he said. "That girl."

"Yeah, righto, that girl. Why the whizbangy thingy?" Private's brow went up and down like an Otis elevator.

"That girl. I'm going to do - do something to her when I get back home. She planned for us to celebrate victory."

"Celebrate with a bang? Oh, I get it, a bang! Tee hee!" Private winked so hard that Skipper got worried about a cramp in his eyelid.

"Let's see what's inside, babe. You take this end, I'll grab this one. One two three and - "

"A bang! That's really, really funny, honey!"

"Yes. Yes, it is. One two three and - "

"Wot's inside, do you think?"

"I'll know when you'll know. Let's pull."

"Oooh, I can't stand the suspense!"

"Me, neither! So pull."
Private closed his eyes to extend a trembling flipper. He grasped the red end of the cracker.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Skipper's eyes twinkled.

"Oh, for Julien's sake, Skippa! Pull!"

They did. Marlene's last surprise exploded as with a bang!, cheap red and green foil gave. Silver and gold confetti flew. Neither had eyes for all that, as pretty as it was. Nor, when they bent, did they linger on the two paper crowns the now broken cracker had contained. Still, Skipper did pop one on his head before he began to look over the detritus scattered across the blankets. He joined Private as they sat tailor fashion.

"Peanut Butter Winkies! That girl! Wot a friend she is!" Private extracted a winkle from its wrapper, licking off the chocolate from around the nougat. He munched the peanuts faster than Skipper, who nibbled one winkle for Private's three.

"Slow down, slow down, you'll get a sugar rush and then crash. We've got a long swim ahead of us."

Private gobbled the last winkle halfway before he caught himself and passed Skipper the rest of it. "Dunno, Skippa, I got a cravin' for them worse than usual. Must be all the fresh air and, er, exercise I've been gettin'."

"They are just the thing to celebrate. You go, girl."

"Marlene, you're talkin' about."

"Sure! She da man, um, woman, oh you know what I mean."

"Oh," Private managed, trying to rise and landing right back onto their blankets instead, his limbs loose and sprawled. "I believe the winkle has gone right to my head." He looked as pliable as Silly Putty, Skipper thought, ready for shaping. He placed the other crown on Private's noggin.

"Heh. Mine, too."

Private questioned his love with a look into sharp blue eyes and then switched his gaze to somewhat lower. The younger bird reacted by picking up the Gammel Dansk for a little snort. "Must you always be so crude?"

"You like it. You wish you could be as direct as I am." Skipper plucked the bottle from Private's slack flipper. Then he flourished it as he took a step back and began dancing, snapping his hips while he hauled back his flippers as if rowing in the Yale-Harvard Boat Race.

Private's eyes became half-lidded, and not from the alcohol. He adjusted his crown. "Well. That's certainly direct."

Skipper smirked around a slug of Gammel Dansk and flung the bottle to the far side of the blanket. "I'm going to take advantage of you now."

"You can't take advantage of the willin'."

"Grant's special blend! You're full of liquid courage, aren't you?"

"Liquid somethin', anyway." Private jerked his head. "Why not come here and have a drink?"

Skipper sat back on his haunches, laughing. "Must you always be so crude?"
"Ah," Private sighed as he felt that wide, warm beak close around him. "I have had a smashin' teacher."

Skipper licked, rubbed, and nuzzled, but nothing exciting got out of the starting gate. He lay flat, idly crossing his ankles. "It goes like this sometimes, no matter what you do. Let's, let's - "

Private giggled as he stood up. "Skippa, let's dance." He opened his flippers to embrace an agreeable commander.

"Here, on gravel?" Skipper murmured as he started to lead.

Private stalled the lead as he said, "I want to karaoke with you."

"There's not a machine in sight - "

"Crikey, I meant carioca, the dance we did on Åland until you stopped it from going all the way."

Skipper had to think. "Oh right, the one from the movie. With you twerking like that, I had to halt to escape your charms." He knocked his forehead into Private's and clasped Private's hips as he ground their crotches together. "It's full steam ahead now."

Private's eyes rolled up and he shivered before he could join in to grip muscled glutes in turn. He moved in tandem slower than the tempo of the dance called for because when he tried to jazz it up, Skipper's greater height and heft prevailed to slow him down.

Skipper laughed low and deep. "Chill and enjoy, babe. You don't know your own strength, but I know mine. Yeah, it took thoughts of Alice and Officer X getting it on to subdue me, and I didn't know exactly what was happening in my head because it wasn't on straight after nearly dying." He hummed *I can't get no satisfaction*. "When I felt heaps better right before we flew back to En Why Cee, then I dreamed, uh, hoped to dream of something happening with us."

Skipper freed a flipper to smooth the shocked look with a practiced caress. "Yes, my baby. Let's face it, I'm not likely ever to be a dad and well, seeing you hatch drummed responsibility for you right into my think melon. *Protect*beats in my head even now.*"

Private stopped swaying to unspoken music and seized the flipper as distress flooded his face. "You cannot think of me as your baby. I w-won't have it. Not after the last four months. You cannot."

Skipper kissed the shaking bird as he channeled Officer's Mentoring Manual Statute Three Sixteen: Treat Those Under You As Over You Because Without Them What Are You. "No, I don't any more and I didn't before we started to date, much less, er - er. Um. Uh."

"Have sex. Don't look away!"

Skipper had withstood sterner tongue lashings than this one. He had turned his head only for a second when he needed it most. "Give me space, will you? Patton's penny loafers!"
Private turned away and wrung his flippers as he sniffled, "I th-thought after the last four months and even before, before when I saved your bloody life on Åland and before that, when Dave kidnapped me and I c-came through hero-like to save penguindom from the uglies that you'd see me as - "

Hugs would have to do for the nonce to return the vacation on track with the best words Skipper could come up with, and he knew, he knew he wasn't as good with words as Kowalski was. Skipper held Private from behind as he murmured, "Babe, I know you're adult. A young adult, but adult, good golly molly, I wouldn't have been down there doing that if I didn't. Believe me. Stop crying. That's an order."

"I'm not!"

Skipper turned him around to check. Tears shimmered but did not fall. Private placed his flippers akimbo as Skipper took a step back literally and metaphorically to gesture to the Bronze Anteroom's splendor. "I feel better on this vacation and it's mostly your doing." It was time to tweak Operation: Spelunker Bunker Younker. "We'd have gone on okay if we hadn't visited here, but don't we deserve better than just okay?"

Private nodded and at the movement, one tear escaped as Skipper pretended not to notice. He plotzed and pulled Private onto his lap. Private lifted his head off Skipper's shoulder in a shorter time than he would have one year ago.

"How do you do it, Skippa?" Private twiddled one loose feather before tugging it free from Skipper's neck. He licked where it had joined his love's skin and allowed it to drift away.

Skipper had never felt more mellow. "Do what?"

"Be right all the time. Make the right decision for the team, every braap - I mean, every blinkin' time." With a smile, Private disengaged and sat beside his commander before he rolled onto his tummy. He pillowed his head on crossed flippers.

Skipper inched open the door to the memory vault of his early career as he beheld the light leave Xochi's eyes when she bubbled her last breath at her Quetzaltenango condo. He saw Rico kneel down for a final kiss. He felt Private's youthful sobs shake his belly as he stroked the tween's back. He noticed speculation over missed options behind Kowalski's somber gaze that would never make it past his beak. He observed Manfredi's and Johnson's valiant, weathered faces fall from hopeful to resigned.

He slammed the door shut. "Whoever told you I never botch command decisions is trying to sell you something, Private, so don't believe all you hear." It was time to leave Howe. "How about we split? Come on, we're burning daylight." Realizing he sounded brusque, he added softly, "It was a chingon gloryoutiful vacation, babe."

Private's embrace was heartfelt. "It was." The smile faded as he jerked apart. "Oooh, wait, your thimble! We didn't get it." He headed toward the humans' part of the caverns, towing Skipper behind him until the commander stopped short. Private spun on his heel.

"Reach should always exceed the grasp, yadda yadda. Private, I'm giving up on the thimble, no, I'm exchanging it for the security of leaving by Howe's original entrance with no humans to dodge, how do you like them apples?"

Private's lower beak wibbled. "Doesn't sound like you, Skippa. We could sneak into the gift shop now, since it's not ten yet and humans aren't out and about. You could complete your collection - "
Skipper shook his head. "Yellowstone National Park is what I need to complete my collection, and Howe isn't Yellowstone. It's tulips."

"Who are you and wot have you done with Skippa? Wot the aitch eee double hockey sticks do tulips - "

Skipper placed a calming touch on both tense shoulders. They slumped gradually as he explained. "Say you want to go to Paris. You want to see the Eiffel Tower, the Mouflon Rouge, the waterlilies of Manet, and those funny little pastries named after Napoleon the First, or Second, or Eighth, hell I don't know. But you can't get to Paris. You can get to Holland. Holland is nice. Holland has wooden shoes, lots of good beer, and tulips instead of waterlilies. Holland works best for the sitch, Private."

Skipper thought Private's eyes filled again and he wasn't having any grief on this bittersweet leavetaking. "Righto. Tulips."

The commander swatted a delectable behind to jumpstart their trip homeward. "Tulips."

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