

LIMBAWAY 13: TRANSITIONS -PART 1

by Paul Watson

The boardroom, well, the plainly decorated single meeting room, cups of coffee on the low table as upper management hold their meeting, "So, they've finally fixed the tank?" Marcia asks, running down the meeting notes.

"Indeed. We will need to get some more if we intend to expand work on Mr Foster's serums as well as the purple."

"We really need a better name than 'purple'." Angela idly circles her finger around the desk, drawing patterns in spilled coffee.

"Isn't that your department, Angel?"

"Hey, no trying to get me to work."

"Kind of my job. Kind of your job, too, come to think of it."

"Fine. I'll come up with something, slavedriver."

"Good."

"And our thoughts on Loretta's proposed research path?"

"Doc, you...you don't think it's really a research path, do you?"

"Of course. What else..."

"Doc, she's planning on using LimbShift, no, that doesn't sound right, anyway, that to...physically change her body...to fit her...properly?"

"Oh, I...see, I think. You think we should refuse, then?"

"Oh, God, no. If we do that, she'll do it anyway and we won't get any information at all. Plus her protocol is stepwise and allows us to backtrack. So, no, she does it with our support. And if it works, we'll have another possible market."

"You really didn't see what she was doing? You are the most oblivious genius I've ever known." Doctor Harrison harrumphs.

Later in the lab, Hank leans over the countertop, the area around him crowded with cages. Drone stands behind him, a notepad in hand, "What's taking them so long?" Loretta asks, pacing back and forth.

"They are usually in their meetings longer than this." Hank replies, measuring the mice to get dosage effects. Drone writes all the notes down, hooves clapping on the floor.

"I'm nervous, ok? What if they say no?"

"They won't."

"Why are you so sure?"

He finally looks up, "Because they let us turn Drone into a demicentaur. You're not asking for anything like that."

"I'm asking to let it go on..."

"And our CEO has had four arms since before we joined. It would be a shock if they don't."

"I know, but what if..."

"Then I expect a small amount of product to mysteriously disappear and a newly validated coworker to equally mysteriously turn up."

"But..."

"You're worrying about things you can't control. That's always bad for your mental health."

"Aren't you worrying about Dalia?"

"Obviously, but I can do something about that, so I'm channelling it into something productive."

"Right. But..."

The door opens, "Ms James, Mr Foster, good news, the board has approved your proposals." Loretta's breath slides out of her in relief.

The next day, Loretta sits staring at the small pot of purple goop sitting on the countertop,. "Are...are you ok?" Jennifer asks.

"It's just...what if it doesn't work? I'm getting my hopes up and..."

"It already worked, didn't it?"

"Maybe that was a fluke. Maybe I'll just turn into a pile of goo."

"Maybe it will work."

"Maybe."

"But if you don't start..."

"I guess." she picks up a cloth and opens the pot, pouring the goop over it. She rolls up her sleeve, "Here goes everything." and awkwardly wipes the formula over her skin. Her arms twists and flexes and bubbles like a heated pot before calming down, stabilising in a more feminine shape. Loretta slowly turns her arm, inspecting for anything suspicious or wrong. "Four fingers, check. Thumb, check. No tentacles, check. Take two." she takes up another cloth, "Let's see if it still functions." She rolls up her other sleeve and carefully applies another cloth full of purple gel to that arm.

That afternoon, the doors open to the lab and Hank backs in, pulling a wheelchair. Sitting in it, legs strapped into place is a just past-teenage woman, her black hair pulled into tufts, making her seem younger, well-muscled arms resting on the chair outside her t-shirt. She's thick-set, her legs looking too thin for her body. "Hi, Hank. Who's this?"

"I'm Dalia." she replies before he can respond, "Uncle Hank convinced my mom that he might be able to help me here."

"Please to meet you, Dalia. I'm Loretta." Loretta reaches down. Dalia shakes her hand, then looks down at it, then up at Loretta's face, then down again. Loretta winces.

"Your hand...sorry."

"It's ok. I'm still getting used to them myself."

"I shouldn't stare, though. I get enough of that. Everyone wants to get a look at the cripple."

"Dalia!"

"I'm fine. You can let go now." she puts her hands on her wheels, pushing herself forward.

"Drone, say hello to Dalia."

Drone turns, extending a hand with undulating tentacles instead of fingers. "This Drone says hello."

"Does everyone here have..." she trails off.

"This Drone is experimenting with the properties of one of the experimental compounds. It takes no offence at that being noticed."

"Why are you calling yourself a drone?"

Drone turns its head, drawing a gasp from Dalia as she stares at the empty bowl where Drone's brain should be. "This Drone has no brain. It is a research Drone rather than a person. It will not be a person until work hours are over."

Dalia blinks, trying to take that in. "But..." she looks up at her uncle, "you could have warned me this place was so freaky! Sorry, sorry, no offence."

"This Drone takes no offence."

"Anyway, your uncle's the real freak."

"What?"

"What?!"

"Look at him. He's so...normal. Around here, that's the freakiest thing possible."

Dalia laughs a little. "Oh, sure, my uncle the freak. He's been real cagey as to *how* he's going to help me. So how does..." she waves at Drone, "...all this help?"

"He'd better explain. I have no idea what he's planning."

"You make it sound so...nefarious."

"So explain and it won't? I'm sure Dalia will believe what you say, whatever that is, now."

"Uh-huh. Definitely."

Hank adjusts his glasses, taking them off, cleaning them and replacing them on his nose. "So, this is LimbAway." he pulls out a pot of cream, "And it vanishes limbs."

"It...vanishes limbs? Like forever?"

"We also have LimbAhoy which restores the limbs. After two days, it gets progressively harder, but

it functions at least a week afterwards.”

”Also can be used to add limbs.”

”So your plan is to what? Vanish my legs and then use that Ahoy stuff to grow new ones?”

”We should try that first, but so far applying LimbAhoy to an Awayed area regrows the original limb so...”

”So I’d still have these.”

”Probably.” Hank replies. “But it would be better to be sure.”

”But that isn’t what you had planned because you don’t think it will work.”

”Correct.”

”So this is basically mysterious freaky chemicals 101.”

”If you like. Regardless, we have also discovered that mixing the two compounds together provides...greater effects.”

”Greater?”

”It’s what gave Drone its fingercles.”

”So I could get tentacles instead of legs?”

”Probably not. So far, only Drone’s been able to generate non-human features. We think it might be because of its lack of brain making its body image more pliable than a regular person.”

”Are you sure you should be talking about her like...”

”This Drone is an it, not a her. And it is a Drone. It does not need to have its feelings protected.”

”You realise that even without the fingers...tentacles...fingercles, that she’s extra freaky, right?”

”It, not she.” Drone corrects.

”Sorry? But...”

”Hank, this Drone asks if it is planned that Dalia will be present when this Drone reverts?”

”It...can be, if she’s ok with it.”

Drone nods. “Then Sindi will explain then.”

”Who’s Sindi?”

”When this Drone is human, it is Sindi.”

”When...ok, I’ll wait because I’m clearly missing something, but this is going to have to be really good.”

Drone turns back to its work.

”So, anyway, no, we wouldn’t expect tentacles, but it should be possible for the process to regrow your legs as they were before...”

”Right.”

”But first...” he pulls out pots of LimbAway and Ahoy.

”Do you have a private room? I’m not sure I want to...you know, with everyone here.”

At the end of the work day, Dalia folds her arms across her chest as she glares up at her uncle “Why not?” she protests, “It’s easier without them!”

”Because your mom would kill me if she thought I’d done any harm to you and before you explained the situation, I’d already be dead.”

”That...is possible. Right. I’ll lay the groundwork for you.”

”This Drone apologises for interrupting but it is the end of the work day and this Drone’s protocols indicate it is time to become Sindi.”

”Right. Dalia, do you want to watch this?”

”I...it’s not gory, is it?”

”No, it’s just as bloodless as your transformation earlier.”

”Then why not?”

”Be warned. Sindi is...very different from Drone.”

Dalia questionably raises her eyebrow.

”You’ll see.” he pulls on a fresh pair of gloves and begins to apply to Drone’s head.

Shortly, Sindi blinks, “Hi, sweetie. I’m Sindi, with two i’s to see you better.” she giggles, “How are you doing? Are they treating you well? I mean, of course, they are, they treat me well and I’m not

even Hank's cousin, but it doesn't hurt to ask and this place can be scary if you're not used to what happens here, I guess, when I first came here I was already Drone, well, I wasn't Drone, but I was as mindless as Drone, but Brad, that's another researcher here, had taken me back home and wiped out my brain, not that I use it much, I'm probably more of an airhead than Drone and she, it, literally doesn't have a brain."

Dalia blinks, "Sorry, I caught maybe half of that?"

"You should have said because otherwise I'll just ramble on with whatever flits into my head, which is why I like being a Drone here as it's so nice to be able to, like, just concentrate on something without chasing my thoughts like a cat with one of those red-pointy laser thingies. Are you old enough to drink, because us lab rats need to stick together, especially if you're going to be here a while so you'll need to get used to Drone and, you know, everything else that goes on here. They didn't even tell you what your cousin was working on before now and that's just such a cool thing and..."

"Right...I should probably not do that on day one. I don't know if I'm even staying."

"Oh, of course, there I go making assumptions and just talking on. See you tomorrow, well, Drone will see you tomorrow, seeing as I'm Drone when I'm here and only Sindi when I'm outside as it doesn't matter so much if I'm a ditz out there but in a lab a ditz like me would be a real liability, you know? Toodles."

Dalia waits until she's gone, "What the hell kind of Jekyll and Hyde is she on?"

"We're...working on that, but it's not a high priority. She doesn't experience any harm from it and it's been stable."

"Still with the 'it'."

"I meant the situation."

"Sure, weird uncle Hank." she replies as he backs her out the door.

"Stop that."

"Naaaaaah."

Some days later, back in the lab, Loretta takes a deep breath and covers her left hand in pink cream, watching nervously as it vanishes. "Worried, Loretta?"

"Piss off, Hemmings."

"No, no, I really am concerned for you."

"Really." she replies flatly.

"Well, I can tell when I'm not wanted." he turns and walks to the other end of the lab.

She takes another deep breath.

"Are you really ok?" Jennifer asks, hovering by her shoulder.

"Let's pretend I am, huh?"

"Yeah, ok."

"I know it will work. It has to. But what if..."

Jennifer holds up the pot of Ahoy. "One way to find out, right?"

"Yeah. I guess, but I don't know I can face it if..."

"It's ok."

"It's not. But..." she takes another deep breath and rubs the blue gel onto her stump, staring anxiously at the regrowing limb. She breathes quickly until her hand is restored, exactly as it was before it vanished, slender and unmistakably feminine. "It worked!! It fucking worked!!" she sobs in relief, brandishing her hand, tears sending her make up running. "I...I didn't...I couldn't let...it works! It works!!!"

Later, "No, Adira, Dalia is going to be fine...Well, yes, we do have Drone working in the lab but... Yes, I realise she's talking about removing her legs...No, Adira, I absolutely am not encouraging her...I realise you're her mother...Of course you're only looking out for her best...no, I'm not being sarcastic, but if I could continue to...yes, Adira. Love you too." he puts the phone down, pinching his nose.

"Problems?"

"My sister is...she is worried about Dalia and since she lost her legs, she's been...protective. But now that I can do something..." he breathes out, "it's frustrating. Anyway, I see you're progressing well."

"Is it that obvious?" Loretta answers, smiling in a face that lacks her formerly square jaw and five-o'clock shadow, her voice several notes higher, her nose much smaller and perter, her lips looking fuller.

"There are signs to a scientific eye. And I did read over your schedule."

"It's going to be hell for the next few weeks. Knowing I'm so close and just..."

"Frustrating?"

"Maybe a little more than that."

"Know the feeling."

"Going to let it stop you?"

"Hell no."