

Mary

Mary cursed as the bag of oranges slipped from her grip and crashed onto her tidy stoop. Splattered and bruised fruit went everywhere, rolling into the flowerbeds on either side.

Opening the door, she carefully went in to avoid stepping in any of the smushed fruit. Setting the other bags in the hall, she went out to salvage what she could. Fortunately, a goodly number of the oranges had remained in the bag, and some of the ones that had fallen in the soft dirt had survived relatively unscathed. After collecting all the good ones, she picked up her bags from the hall and went to the kitchen.

Depositing her groceries onto the counter, she went for a dustpan and a small plastic sack from her last trip and went to clean up. She went to the stoop to find a small nuthatch had already flitted from one of the neighbor's trees and was busy chewing on some of the exposed meat. It took startled wing when it caught sight of her, and she watched it race into a tree and take refuge on a branch. It hopped around twittering madly at her, and she laughed.

"Well, it's not my fault your meal got interrupted." She told it. "Because I'm not going to leave orange pulp and juice all over my doorstep."

Bending over, she plucked the smashed oranges and placed them in the bag. Using the dustpan, she scraped the concrete stoop until she had gotten most of the pulp up, and finally she used a hose to wash off the rest and juice into her flowers. "I guess that'll be some extra fertilizer." She laughed. She cocked her head as a thought struck her.

"Hmm, well. There should be plenty more here to fertilize my flowers." She laughed and looked up at the still scolding nuthatch. "And you can eat whatever you can from the beds. Don't worry. Just don't take my flower bulbs and we won't have any problems, 'kay?"

Tossing the now empty bag into the garbage, she turned to walk back into her house when she saw the mailman pull up to her mailbox. From her angle, she couldn't see if he put anything in the box or not before he drove up.

Rats. If only I had had a better angle, I might not've had to go to the mailbox. Oh well, no use crying about it. Mary shook her head and strode over to the mailbox.

It looked like she wouldn't have had a choice anyway. There were several letters in there for her, including an odd brown one that had a lump in the bottom of it. Mary stared at it curiously for a minute before putting it with the stack. She didn't have time to open them yet, although she was curious to know who had sent the brown one; there were groceries getting quite warm on her counter. If she didn't hurry, she would have more to clean than those oranges!

Mary sighed as she leaned back in her favorite futon. The chair had been extended out so she could put her feet up. It felt so good to take a load off her feet! All those chores this morning! And the rest of it! Why the heck did people always have to stop by when she was busy?

Well, she was no longer busy now, so it would probably be a good time to read the mail. She had the group of them sitting next to her chair. Pulling the lot over to her, she began to sort them. Once more the plain brown envelope caught her eye. Pursing her lips she turned it over and saw her name clearly stenciled in the address line, however there was no return address. Strange. Mary wondered if she should just pitch it. She turned it over slowly, searching for some clue to the identity of the sender as

she tried to decide. She fondled the bulging shape in the bottom of the envelope, trying to decide what it was. It was round and flat, but thick. Mary had no clue as to what it could be. It seemed there would only be one way to find out.

Taking her letter opener from its place on the cabinet, she worked the blade under the top of the envelope and slit it across the top. Setting the blade aside, she turned it over in her hand.

A fat gold coin fell into her palm. Her eyes bulged at the sheer size of the thing, it was heavy! Who...? She turned it over in her hand, noting the engraving on the back was of a strange half-human half-horse creature. On the front it bore a round horseshoe above a stick shooting stars from its tip and a round collar with the clasp open and a chain snaking away from it. That symbol gave her the shivers.

She cried out in shock as the coin began glowing. She promptly dropped her hand away, but the coin stuck to it as if it had fused itself with her. She watched in horror as the glow crept her arm.

The phone! She had to get to the phone! Jumping up from the couch she made a run towards the kitchen telephone. On her third step her legs seized up and she nearly toppled over before catching herself on the edge of her chair.

I can't get to the phone! What do I do! Mary watched helplessly as the glow consumed her entire body. At last she started to scream in fright and terror. In front of her, her own stomach *bulged* like a balloon inflating, growing quickly. In seconds, two protrusions emerged and lengthened, becoming long legs terminating in...*hooves?! There* couldn't be any doubt that the hard semi-circular shapes at the end of the legs were hooves. The waved wildly in the air for a moment as her frozen mind tried to comprehend.

A shift in her center of balance made her turn her head. She watched as her body grew very long, her back legs shifting and melting into horse legs as well. Her clothes were shredded rags that fell off her rapidly transforming body.

The glow vanished from her as fast as it had come. The coin fell from nerveless fingers and landed on the floor with a solid *thunk*. Sweat stung her eyes and her lungs heaved like she had run a hundred miles. Strangely, there hadn't been any pain through the entire process, just fright and an overwhelming sensation of ants crawling all over her skin.

She couldn't stay there like a lump, she had to find help. A inner voice commanded her to get to the phone and call 911.

Taking a deep breath, she took a hesitant step forward. She about fell forward on her face. She recovered and took another step, and then another. The phone was there. She grabbed it and punched in three numbers. A moment passed and then...

"911." The voice was calm.

"Help! I need help, please!" Mary called desperately.

"Ma'am, I'm going to need you to speak English into the phone." The operator said slowly and calmly.

Mary stared at the phone in disbelief. "I *am* speaking English!" she shouted. A crackle in the line gave her an electronic echo. Confusion filled her. Over the odd-sounding language, she could clearly hear her mind whispering the translation. It *was* her voice, but it wasn't her language it was speaking, was it?

"Please, please. Help me." She whispered. Shockingly, she felt a tear start to slide down her cheek. She *never* cried.

"Ma'am. I can't understand what you are saying. I'm going to trace your call and vector units in to you." The voice said comfortingly. Underneath; "Victor two-one, there is an emergency situation at 542 Elm Street. Please be advised that the call is

speaking a foreign language and the situation is unclear.” Those words filled Mary with comfort. At least she would get help. She thanked the voice.

“Don’t worry ma’am. I’m going to stay right here until help comes.” The operator said reassuringly. “You just keep speaking to me until officers get there, OK?”

Mary didn’t know what else to do, so she sat there and talked. The emergency operator sat there and listened, making agreements and such when she paused for breath. Mary was grateful to him, at least being able to talk things out helped her to make sense of things, and take the edge off her panic.

“—ma’am, I have a locblo tokk maldocc trall.” The voice told her. Mary blinked. *What?*

“Umm, excuse me?” she asked in confusion.

“Mbleb taek na motal.” The voice continued, unperturbed. As far as he had been concerned, she had been speaking gibberish to him for several minutes. The sudden loss of understanding of his language confused and frightened her a great deal. What was happening?

The sound of tires pulling up the driveway startled her. She went to the window and peered out. Instead of the cop car she expected to see, there was a black sports car. Three men got out of it, dressed in dark suits with Ray Ban sunglasses.

The three men walked towards her door, and Mary was suddenly very afraid. She dropped the curtain and began to back away from the window.

The sound of a police siren filled her with relief. She went back to the window to see two police cars pull up. The three men saw them as well. To her surprise, one man waited for them while the others continued on to her door.

What were the men doing here? How did they find out so fast? What were they going to do to her? Her mind whirled with these questions as she stared out her window. One of the men spotted her and nudged his partner. From his vantage point, all he could have seen of her was her top, but it made her pull back and try to hide her lower body nonetheless. A moment later there came a knock at her door.

“MRX” came the shout through the door. Once more, Mary couldn’t understand the words that were being spoken. She tried to tell them as much. Tears of frustration started to fall down her face, there was no way they could understand what she was trying to say. But...

“F...B...I” the man said slowly and clumsily. But she could understand it!

“Oh, thank god!” she cried in relief. “I had hoped that someone would come! What’s happening to me? What’s going on? How are you understanding me, what’s...”

“Calm...down. Help...on...way.” The man said slowly. “Stay...put.”

“Okay.” Mary was hopeful. They had to know a cure or something.

Outside, she the agents were talking to the police officers. Mary wasn’t sure what was being said, but whatever it was the officers began speaking rapidly into their handsets. A moment later the cruisers had sped down towards the end of the street. A moment later they were out of her sight.

Thoughts and questions continued to swirl in Mary’s mind as she tried to remain calm. She kept an eye on the clock, watching the hands move ever so slowly around the face. After three hours, her yard began to look like a Hollywood crime scene. Dozens of black vehicles had arrived, and men in black suits, dogs and automatic weapons patrolled her front yard and the neighborhood. Her neighbors had been evacuated thirty minutes after the first cars had arrived. Mary had gotten extremely nervous as three vans pulled up and men got out in plastic suits and filter masks.

They began pulling plastic wrap and piping from trucks and began placing it over the front of her house.

The fact that no one had come in to talk to her was starting to make her panic. The preparations seemed to be those done for nuclear accidents and spills. Had she been exposed to radiation? Had that been what had changed her? Deep fears of radiation filled her. Would she get cancer? What about her kids? She had always wanted a couple, even though there hadn't been any prospects lately.

The lack of communication had started to grind on her nerves. Crazy thoughts began flitting at the edges of her consciousness. Should she smash out the window and run the hell away? Should she start screaming for help? Maybe she should kill herself and escape being locked away like some animal?

She shuddered and pushed the thoughts away. She was *not* going to kill herself. She was going to get better and come back to her life. She tried to take the thought and make it her goal. Fear kept pushing it away however.

The sound of her door opening shocked her and made her halt her pacing and face the door. A tall man with broad shoulders and wavy brown hair walked in and stopped not four feet from her.

"Good evening, ms. Mary." He told her calmly.

"Good evening." She replied automatically through her shock. How... of course.

He noticed her expression and nodded. "As you have just guessed, you are not alone in this."

"How are you understanding me?" Mary asked quietly.

"I can speak Kentauric, the language of the centaurs. When you were...turned your language itself shifted. You probably noticed that everyone began speaking a different language?" When she nodded, he smiled. "Well, you aren't crazy. It's all part of the packet."

"Packet?" she asked heatedly.

"The coin." He said bitterly. "It's a bomb. It transforms its victims and leaves them completely altered. It takes about a couple of days for the transformations to complete themselves, but the changes are, so far, irreversible."

The words hit Mary like a hammer blow. *Irreversible*. She'd never be human...again? It took her a moment to realize his hand was holding hers.

"It's not that bad. There's a place where you can go...to be yourself. It's wide open, good spaces to run, plenty of forest where you can hide, and others like yourself there."

"There's others...like me?" Mary asked dazedly.

"There's a thriving community there. Centaurs, harpies, mermaids,...you'll be in good company there."

Mary stared at the abyss and trembled. "But, my family? Surely they must—" she trailed off at the pained look in his eyes.

"The Farm survives through secrecy. Other than occasional messages, I'm afraid your family can never know your actual location." He saw the pain that twisted her features. "Don't worry." He added comfortingly. "There will be people there who can help you adjust. You won't be alone. Someone will be there to help you through every step of the way."

"But my parents" she said pleadingly.

"Won't even know anything is wrong. There will be people who will arrange for it to seem as if you've simply accepted an excellent job out of state and had to leave immediately." He told her. "You can certainly write to them. However, actual voice communications are out until you re-learn English."

She looked up. "I can relearn English?" she asked hopefully. If she could, she'd be able to talk to her parents again.

Some of what she was thinking was on her face, because he grinned. "That's the idea."

The movement of a suited man outside her window grabbed her attention, and then the obvious question popped in her mind. "How come you aren't in one of those suits?" she gestured to the man outside her window as she asked.

"Oh, one of our rad suits?" he asked. He sighed. "They are protected because of that coin. It's still emitting transformational radiation." She backed away alarmed, but he continued. "Don't worry, the primary pulse was released when you touched it. However, there is still enough to turn someone if we aren't careful. As to why I haven't changed..."

There is a tiny portion of the population, less than half a percent, which is seemingly immune to the magic pulse. They don't change when exposed to its power. Only they, and I, can safely handle the coins."

"Coins. You mean there is more than one." Mary asked. She already knew the answer, but it gave her time to organize her thoughts.

"Yes. There have been a series of attacks on the populace in the past four months. You've heard about the recent rash of anthrax letters?"

She nodded. Who hadn't heard about them? Thirty letters in...wait.

He nodded sadly as the realization dawned. "Those "anthrax" letters were in reality coin bombs. Those people are alive and safe, but turned. It isn't safe for them to go out in public, yet."

"So that means—" she began.

"That the public has been fed the story of anthrax and that you are, unfortunately, the latest victim." He said sadly.

Once more, she thought of her parents. "But you said my parents would know that I'm safe." She protested. If they looked at the news story, they would think she was dead! The thought of the agony her parents would feel made her reach for the phone.

"I wouldn't bother. We've shut off your line." The man told her calmly. "And yes, you are correct that I told you your parents would think you are out of town. However, I'm in real time communication with the people outside," he pointed towards his ear where Mary assumed he had an earbug emplaced, "and they are telling me that it is better for you to disappear completely for a while. I know it's hard, but your parents *have* to put on a convincing display that you are dead in order to keep people from looking for you. It should only be for a couple of weeks, until you can speak enough English to talk to them."

Mary shook her head firmly, her tail swishing her displeasure. "I will not allow my parents to think I'm dead." She said hotly. "It'd kill my mom! And as for my dad..." she trailed off, the thought of what her death would do to her father too terrible to contemplate.

The man smiled. "I can see you are going to make yourself quite the home on the Farm. All right. I'll make a call and see if we can't inform your parents that you're still alive. We can arrange for a cover story, you got partial exposure and you're in terror for your life. That should hold for a few weeks until you're ready to talk to them personally." He glanced over her again and frowned. "I should warn you though. It will probably have to be through telephone, and you won't be able to reveal what has happened to you and where you are. As I've said, we can't allow the location of the Farm to get out, for the safety of others." He peered at her sternly. "It's a treasonable offense, both for your parents and for yourself."

Mary gulped. She hadn't thought of that! Now she wasn't so sure she wanted them to know she was alive. If just knowing about what she'd become or where she was could be construed as treason, who knows what might happen to them if she demanded they visit!

Visions of her parents being taken away to Fort Gitmo filled her mind and she shuddered. She quickly pushed the thought away and tried to glare a hole through the man. He remained unruffled, much to her annoyance.

"And what if I decide *not* to come to your farm?" she growled. "I could just stay here and let the world find out what was happening. Move to my Mom and Dad's and live..."

"I'm afraid that won't happen." The man said quietly, and sadly. "Believe me. I've thought of that before, and have let one do just that. She disappeared before we had even cleared the yard. There had been agents left behind to guard her until we could get a handle on the situation." He shook his head angrily. "The survivor told us that an old man had appeared in a white flash and clap that stunned and disoriented them. While they were still getting their wits about them, the man killed five men and women with a variety of spells. Fortunately, the one set on him was weak and merely hurled him into a wall hard enough to shatter a couple of ribs. As for her, she tried to run and was immediately collared with a wave of his hand. She was captured and vanished into thin air."

His deep blue eyes met hers levelly. "We haven't found a trace of her since."

Mary found herself shuddering and looking about her, afraid the old man would suddenly appear in a cloud of smoke to enslave *her*. Her search eventually brought her back to him.

"I wouldn't worry too much about him." The man said. "We keep hoping he'll be stupid enough to try a snatch when we're here in full force and ready, but he never does. He strikes before we get here or after we leave."

He glanced down at his watch. "Unfortunately, we cannot stay much longer here. I've got to get back to the farm before midnight to get you settled in. I'll have some agents bag your stuff, but in the meantime grab an overnighter and we'll be on our way."

Mary thought again about protesting, but realized it would be ultimately futile. He could order people to drug her and take her away if he wanted too. The fact that he hadn't already, and had been nice enough to tell her what was happening, were points in his favor. Besides, she didn't want to stay here in case someone *did* come to try and turn her into a pet!

Magic, centaurs and government agents. Mary shook her head. It sounded like the plot to some horrible B movie. It scarcely felt like reality, and she wished that she could wake up in her nice warm bed and forget all about this nightmare.

Decision made, Mary went to grab an overnight bag. As she walked to her bedroom, she turned back to the man who was squatting down over the top of the coin where it lay glinting on her floor.

"Excuse me," she said. "But I didn't get your name, Agent...?"

He smiled. "Agent, oh, no ma'am. Name's Douglas, that's all."

"Thank you...Douglas." She said and continued back to her bedroom.

Her bedroom had always been a sanctuary to her. Her bright blue walls, covered with her favorite nature posters and paintings, never failed to cheer and soothe her even in her foulest moods. She looked at the one with the temples in the mist longingly. Mary doubted she would ever see any of them again.

Suddenly wishing to be gone from that place, she hurriedly gathered what she needed. Going to her closet, she pulled out a small travel bag and tossed the spare t-shirts and bras in.

I doubt I'll need any pants while I'm gone, or panties. It's not like I'd have any that'll fit my big butt now.

Finished, she left her room. As the door closed behind her, she whispered "Good bye." The door latched with a firm click. It was just her imagination, of course, but the sound seemed final, as if a chapter in her life had come to a close.

Out in the front room again, she was surprised to see several other agents in with Douglas. In front of them was what appeared to be a small metal tower. There was a leather handle on top, and the base was over four inches thick. It was evidently very heavy, as it took two men to lift the case off the ground and carry it away.

The coin was missing from the floor as she walked up. She quickly guessed that the case now held the "coin bomb", as Douglas had called it. Mary tightened her grip on her bag, making the handle squeak slightly in protest.

The noise prompted Douglas to turn to her. Spying her he broke open into a welcoming smile. "Ready to go?" he asked.

Mary turned her head one last time to look at her house, at the neat bookshelves and clean counters, her small TV and comfortable chair. She'd lived most of her adult life here, she realized. And now, it was all gone. Her chest felt empty, a painful experience.

"I'm ready." Was all she said, though.

Whether out of politeness for her feelings or because he ran out of things to say, Douglas said nothing but extended his hand towards the door. Mary took a deep breath and stepped out the threshold toward the waiting semi that sat at the curb, its massive black trailer yawning open already. It seemed ready to devour her whole, and she nearly turned back. It took all of her courage to keep walking towards the semi.

Agents in and around her yard stopped what they were doing and watched her solemnly. Mary began to get the uncomfortable feeling that she was walking towards a funeral. A line from a movie came to her, and she thought it was entirely appropriate, whispering it out loud to herself.

"You'd find more cheer in a graveyard."

Her hooves clopped loudly on the metal ramp that extended out of the trailer. As she walked in, she noticed it was comfortably appointed, with one chair that had been bolted to the floor, a mattress and a strange saddle like "couch" that seemed to be just big enough for her belly to lie on. There was a small TV in the corner, and a couple of books on the mattress for her.

Mary was surprised to see Douglass walk in with her and the ramp start to close. He took a seat on the sole chair and pulled out a small volume.

"But, aren't you going to sit up front?" she asked in surprise.

Douglass looked at her. "Not unless you'd like me too." He said quietly. "I thought I'd keep you company back here until we make it to our connection."

Mary found the motion strangely comforting and nodded to him as he settled down to read his book.

Guess I've got nothing else to do. I hope they brought something I like. To her delight, she found THE HAUNTED TALES OF MAURICE THE GHOST, one of her favorite novels. Soon she was lost in the adventures of Maurice, his living pal Jessica and their smart alley cat in Friday Harbor.

And the truck drove on.