

Wings

by Trismegistus Shandy

Teaser -- chapters one through five

Because posting prose fiction to DA is a hassle these days, and it's always gotten me fewer readers than posting to other sites, I'm just going to post the first five chapters here now, and then wait until the whole story has been serialized on Scribblehub, BigCloset and TGStorytime. Then I'll post a PDF of the whole story to DeviantArt.

If you want to follow the serial, you can find it here:

- [Scribblehub](#)
- [TGStorytime](#)
- [BigCloset](#)

Scribblehub is overall the easiest to navigate, but doesn't offer the option to get email when a story you follow is updated, as TGStorytime does. BigCloset is just kind of a mess, but I get more readers there than anywhere else, so I'm kind of stuck with it. You don't need to follow me there, though. Take warning.

This story is set in dkfenger's Trust Machines universe and is a sort of sequel to my Pioneers, though I think it stands alone tolerably well. Thanks to dkfenger for opening up his fascinating universe for other authors to write in.

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Brocksboro (the small town the main characters live in), Catesville, and Mynatt County are fictitious; all other places mentioned are real. Brocksboro is roughly where Madison, North Carolina is in real life; Catesville is a few miles south of there.

The story is completed in final draft and I will be posting chapters about once a week until they're all up.

Content warnings: transphobia, misgendering, mention of conversion therapy, anxiety attacks, outing, temporary detransition, life-threatening illness, bodily functions, brief consensual inanimate transformation (still able to see and hear), brief mentions of sex (not explicit), vore (safe, non-harmful eating of reversibly transformed person), consensual transformations of main, secondary, and incidental characters into forms including gender affirmation, scaly, furry, feathery, insectoid, robotic, cyborg, multiple bodies (with and without split consciousness), taur forms, animals (including temporary loss of control to animal instincts), animate dolls and plushies, food, tools and apparel.

Chapter One

“Hey, I’m going to the library to do some research for my term papers. You want to come?” my brother Nathan asked one Saturday morning in October.

“Yeah,” I said, “I need to do some research too. Give me a second to grab my notebooks and stuff.”

A couple of minutes later, after telling Mom where we were going, we headed to the library in Nathan’s car. My mind should have been on my term papers and the references I needed to find to flesh them out, but I couldn’t help thinking about the weird machine that had appeared on the lawn at the library a few weeks ago, and how a bunch of people had been using it to transform each other. I desperately wanted to try it myself, to be something other and better than this uncomfortable wrong-fitting shape I’d worn for my first fifteen years, but Mom and Dad had forbidden me and Nathan from using the machine as soon as they heard about it.

I hoped I could at least see some people using it on the way into or out of the library.

We got there in just a few minutes, parked, and walked past a queue of people waiting to use the machine. It was about eight feet wide and tall and four deep, the same dark brown as the stones the library was built of, with a glowing Venn diagram in the center. Nobody happened to go in the machine or come out during the thirty seconds or so it took us to walk from Nathan’s car to the front door of the library, much to my disappointment, and I resigned myself to study and research for the next couple of hours.

When we’d found what we needed and were about to leave, Nathan surprised me.

“Hey. Do you want to check out that machine before we go? Mom and Dad don’t have to know.”

“Sure,” I said.

It didn’t surprise me that Nathan would disobey Mom and Dad when they weren’t around. Not at all. What surprised me a little was that he wanted to try being something else. He’d given me the impression of being completely at home in his body. He was a football player, a pretty good one, in great shape, and had never had a significant amount of acne, unlike me (or Dad, judging from his high school pictures). He was between girlfriends at the moment, but he’d gotten attention from girls starting from when Mom and Dad thought he was too young to date.

So we checked out our books, and I said, “We’d better put the books in the car. If we transform while holding them, they’re gonna turn into unintelligible nonsense.” I’d overheard rumors about the machine from people at school, though for some reason the news wasn’t saying anything about it.

“Yeah, although if you want any visible change, we’ve got to change back before we go home anyway. But I don’t want to spend the next hour or whatever hauling a stack of books around.”

So we put our books and notebooks in Nathan’s car, and our wallets and Nathan’s phone in the glove compartment. (I wasn’t allowed to have a cellphone yet.) Then we got in line behind an old black couple, in their seventies or eighties, who seemed to be accompanied by their son, judging from what I overheard of their conversation while we waited. The son looked young enough to be their grandson, and I guessed he’d already gotten a friend to rejuvenate him with the machine. The woman was using a walker, the type with a seat you can rest on while it’s parked.

“So what do you want me to turn you into?” I asked, stalling on telling Nathan what I wanted. I figured Nathan would hate me if I told him what I really wanted, but there were other things I wanted to try that would be more socially acceptable and maybe almost as enjoyable.

“I’ll tell you when we’re inside the booth,” he said.

Huh. Nathan wanted something he was ashamed to talk about in front of the other people waiting in line? My mind immediately jumped to several wrong conclusions, and I immediately hated myself assuming bad things about my brother when I knew I was at least as messed up in (probably) a different way. He didn't press me for what I wanted, probably figuring I'd tell him once we were inside, too. And for a minute or two, I thought about doing just that; it seemed easier to put it off... but I found myself thinking more about the kind of thing I *really* wanted, and feeling disgusted with myself. And then I worried that if I put off telling Nathan until he put me on the spot, I might blurt out something that I'd regret. So I carefully rehearsed my words a couple of times and said:

"I want to try being a dragon."

"Huh, I wouldn't have figured. That seems pretty cool, but I don't think a dragon will fit in that booth, will it?"

"Well, obviously not a *huge* dragon like Smaug. More like me-sized. Or a little bigger." I didn't really want to be bigger, but I thought Nathan might respect me more if I said that.

"You want to be able to fly?" the old couple's son asked.

"Yeah, it would be nice."

"You'd probably better be pretty small, then. I read about this guy who got his friend to change him into a person-sized griffin, but he couldn't get off the ground — his wings weren't strong enough for his weight. About the size of a bat or a songbird might work."

"Thanks!" I said. "Yeah, that makes sense. As much as anything about these machines makes sense."

The line moved erratically. Some people took just a minute or so in the Venn machine, some as much as ten minutes. The majority of them were just making each other younger, prettier, and healthier, but there were a couple of more interesting changes, like the couple who changed each other into otter-people or the girl who changed her husband or boyfriend into a baby tapir. When the people ahead of us reached the machine, the younger man put a coin in the slot and pressed the sun icon three times. A three-year change, according to what I'd heard — the longest the machine would allow.

"You want me to change you one at a time?" he asked his parents as the doors popped open. "Or do you feel comfortable changing each other?"

"I think I could learn to use it," his mother said, "but I don't want to be practicing on your father while he's practicing on me. We might both wind up being animals or some such. You ought to do it, Luther."

"All right. Ladies first." His mother went in one booth and Luther went in the other, and they came out again less than two minutes later with her looking at least fifty years younger. I didn't know what had happened to her walker, but it didn't come out of the machine with her. Then another couple of minutes for him to rejuvenate his father, and it was mine and Nathan's turn. While Nathan was putting a quarter in the machine and pressing the one-third slice of Earth icon, to program an eight-hour change, the young-old couple kissed and the people in line behind us applauded. I smiled at them and joined in.

"Come on," Nathan said, and walked into the booth on the left. I hurried into the booth on the right, and the door closed behind me as soon as I was over the threshold. I saw Nathan through what seemed like a transparent wall between the booths — or a huge screen with better resolution than anything humans have got. Scattered around him were little bubbles with images of him changed in various ways: darker, lighter, skinnier, chubbier, more muscular, wearing different clothes. In a few of the smallest bubbles, he looked more radically different, more androgynous or with nonhuman features.

“Okay,” I said, “what was it you didn’t want to tell me out there?”

“I didn’t want somebody overhearing part of it and misunderstanding,” he said. “I want to know if it’s possible to cheat at football with this thing, and if so — hey! When I said ‘football’, most of the pictures of you vanished; I see some regular footballs, some versions of you beefed up in football uniforms, footballs with your face — stuff like that.”

“Don’t touch anything yet!” I said, alarmed. “You remember we talked about what I wanted. I won’t say it in case it starts bringing up versions of *you* that look like that. Anyway, you were saying?”

“Well, if it’s possible to cheat, I need to let Coach Duncan know so he can figure out a way to detect it and stop it.”

“I mean, I’m sure it must be. You just ask the machine to make your partner stronger and faster.” As I said “stronger and faster,” the slenderer, shorter, and chubbier versions of Nathan vanished, replaced by more of the extra-athletic ones, some like bodybuilders, some with leaner runner’s builds, most some balance between the two.

“Yeah, but can you do that while making me look the same, so nobody can tell there’s anything different except my performance? If so, I need to tell somebody so we can start looking for players who are doing that.”

“I don’t know how.” I didn’t know yet that your fingerprints and retina prints changed whenever somebody vanned you into another human shape, even a very similar one. “I’ll try, though. Um — keep his appearance the same, but make him a little stronger and faster?”

The bubbles vanished and were replaced by a new set with a lot less variation from Nathan’s basic appearance. In most, though, I could see some slight difference. I finally found one that looked identical, as far as I could tell, and touched that bubble. Nathan’s appearance in the window or giant screen changed slightly, but I couldn’t quite tell how; it was very subtle.

Meanwhile, Nathan was saying, “A little dragon, about the size of a bat or a robin, with hollow bones,” and studying the screen in front of him. He finally reached out and touched one of the bubbles (which I couldn’t see from where I was) and said, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I think so. I should push my green button before you push yours — I don’t know if I’ll be able to push mine with my snout or claws after I change.”

“Right, go ahead.”

So I pushed the button, and then he reached out to push his, and everything changed. The booth expanded around me in an instant, seeming to get around thirty or forty times bigger. I was looking way up at Nathan, and at the now-open door, and my whole body felt different.

“Come on,” Nathan said, and exited his side of the machine. I was still taking stock of my new complement of limbs, flapping my wings gently and wiggling this leg, then that one, all four in turn. After a few seconds of that, I tried flapping my wings more vigorously, but though that got me off the ground for a moment, I plopped down again a moment later, bumping my snout. It didn’t hurt much. To free up the booth for the next person, I started walking toward the big open door, and after a first few clumsy steps, I got my stride and was across the threshold a few moments later.

Nathan was looking down at me, and so were the people who’d gotten in line behind us a few minutes earlier, a white couple in their mid-twenties and a couple of girls around my age, one Hispanic and one black.

The black girl and the mid-twenties woman squeed over how cute I was, which made me feel good inside, and the black girl asked Nathan, “Can I pet him?”

“Ask him yourself, I guess. I hear when you turn people into animals they can still think like people.”

I tried to talk and made a kind of gurgling-hissing sound, which the girl thought was also extremely cute. I expressed my consent by walking toward her and nodding, then rubbing my snout against the side of her shoe. She bent down and rubbed my snout and then my back between my wings, which felt nice, though it wasn’t arousing or anything.

“You look like you’re having fun,” Nathan said with a bemused smile.

The mid-twenties guy was putting a coin in the slot and pressing some buttons, and the doors, which had closed behind me and Nathan as we emerged, opened again.

“Ready, Connie?” he asked.

“Just a minute,” his wife or girlfriend said. “I want to pet the dragon first.”

The black girl stood up and backed away, and I walked toward the other woman. The Hispanic girl was being standoffish — maybe she had a snake phobia or something. I let Connie pet me for a few seconds, then wiggled out from under her hand and started flapping my wings, trying to get off the ground. She stood there watching for a bit longer before going into the machine with her husband or boyfriend.

It took me several tries, under the watchful eyes of Nathan and the girls, but I finally managed to get up and stay aloft. My flight was pretty erratic at first, and I crashed a few times before I really got the hang of it, but fortunately from relatively low heights and into grass, shrubbery or flowerbeds rather than asphalt or concrete.

The first time that happened, I picked myself up and spluttered the dirt out of my face to find the black girl kneeling over me, looking concerned; Nathan was just a step behind her.

“Are you all right?” she asked. I experimentally flapped my wings and wiggled all my limbs, then nodded my head and gurgled. I was apparently pretty durable, and having a low mass meant that a fall from a moderate height would have low kinetic energy. After that, I tried to stay over the landscaped areas and away from the pavement until I got a little more experience and confidence.

Once he saw I was flying pretty consistently, Nathan called out to me: “I’m gonna go for a jog. Be back in a few.”

I landed in front of him, nodded my head and gurgled. He jogged over toward where he’d parked the car, and I took off again, following him as far as the car, where he got his phone and wallet out of the glove compartment before jogging off down the street. I didn’t follow further, but headed back toward where the girls were standing by the Venn machine. I kept practicing flying, overhearing some of the girls’ conversation but not a lot because of the wind rushing in my ears.

The couple that had gone in the machine took their sweet time figuring out what to change each other into, or finding the forms they wanted in the mazy interface, but eventually they came out looking like cyborgs, with one organic eye and one electronic eye each, and other metal or plastic parts showing here and there. The guy had no hair except for a half-goatee (he’d had no facial hair before) and the woman had hair (longer than before) only on the left side of her scalp, where her organic eye was; the right side seemed to be a curved LED screen with strange symbols and patterns constantly moving and shifting on it. I swooped down from the tree branch where I’d been resting to get a closer look at them, and the woman, Connie, said: “Oh, he’s

flying!”

The black girl, whose name I’d learned was Jada, said, “Yeah, it took him a while to get the hang of having wings, but he’s doing all sorts of tricks now. — Oooh, look!”

Encouraged by her praise, I was doing a series of tight loops and barrel rolls over their heads. Cristina, Jada’s friend, said, “Hey, are you ready to go in the booth or do you want to let somebody else go first?” A few more people had arrived while the cyborgs were transforming each other and I was learning to fly.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Jada said, and they started setting up the machine. I flew a little further afield at that point, out of the library parking lot and over the yards of some houses near the library. I tried to avoid flying over the streets for more than a moment at a time — if I fell, I didn’t want to get run over by a car before I could take off again — or over the roofs of buildings, because if I fell there and got hurt, I could get stuck until the eight hours ran out and I turned back with no way to get down. There was a church not far south of the library that had a playground in the back yard, and there were kids playing there — they seemed to be around kindergarten or first grade. I buzzed them and enjoyed their exclamations of wonder. Some reached up and grabbed at me, but I stayed just out of reach. When the adults supervising them came over to see what the commotion was about, I took off again and flew back to the library; I didn’t want to miss meeting up with Nathan.

He came jogging back into the library parking lot while I was sitting and resting on the branch of an oak, and after looking at something on his phone — I later realized he’d been timing himself with the stopwatch app — he looked around. “Hey,” he said to some of the people in line, “anybody seen a little dragon, about this big?” He held his hands a few inches apart. I swooped down to land on his shoulder.

“You mean the one sitting on your shoulder?” one guy asked as Nathan startled and twisted his head to look at me.

“You about ready to change back?” Nathan asked.

I nodded. I’d have liked to stay that way a lot longer, but I knew we needed to get home before long. So Nathan got in line for the Venn machine, and I continued doing loops and barrel rolls until he got to the head of the line. He was doing something on his phone while he waited. I perched on his shoulder again while he set up the machine.

When I flew into the right-hand booth, I saw that the red and green buttons and the bubbles showing alternate versions of Nathan were down near the floor. I landed near them, but before I could push the red button with my claw, to cancel our transformations, Nathan must have pushed *his* red button. Suddenly I was back to my original human boy body, the buttons had vanished, and the doors had opened.

In the car on the way home, I asked Nathan, “So what did you figure out?”

“I timed myself on several one-block sprints and a longer jog, around ten blocks,” he said. “I was definitely faster on average, though not by much. I’m gonna talk to the coach about it. How about you? You were flying pretty well by the time I got back.”

I smiled at the memory. “Yeah, it took a while to get the hang of it, but it was really fun. I’d like to do it again sometime.”

“Maybe I’ll try it. A falcon, maybe. Not for a while, though. I don’t want to make Mom and Dad suspicious by going to the library more often than we normally would.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely not.” I laughed nervously.

I'd enjoyed flying, but I'd especially enjoyed the attention from Jada and Connie, and the other people who'd come to use the Venn machine while I was flying around the parking lot. Being squeed over as a cute little fabulous animal was markedly better than being ignored as an acne-scarred, scrawny boy. That raised the question of why I didn't want to be a taller, more muscular guy, like most normal guys would. I couldn't explain it, but it just didn't appeal to me. Then I remembered the little kids I'd buzzed at the church playground and I thought of being a little girl, a toddler or preschooler, maybe with dragon-wings, and girls like Jada and Connie awww'ing over me and getting all motherly, and that made me feel warm inside too, for just a moment before I remembered that I wouldn't get a chance to use the Venn machine again for a good while, and when I did, I wouldn't dare ask Nathan for anything like that.

When my friend Meredith Ramsey had come out as transgender, a few weeks earlier, and gotten her sister to use the machine to give her a girl body, both Dad and Nathan had said mean things about her. Mom, too, although not as bad. I'd known Meredith and her siblings for years, since we went to the same church and our parents were longtime friends. We went to different schools and lived in different neighborhoods, though, so we hadn't been all that close until around the time I'm telling you about.

And Meredith's change, and the revelation that the machine at the library could not only make old people young and turn people into animals, but could change people's sex, had put a worm in my brain; I couldn't stop thinking about it. I didn't think I was trans, not like Meredith, but I couldn't stop obsessing over what it would be like to have someone change me into a girl using the machine. Preferably a humanoid dragon-girl, but I'd take a human girl body too, just to see what it was like. Fat chance of getting Nathan to do it, or my parents letting me go to the library with anyone else, though.

That wasn't the only thing I daydreamed about turning into, of course. My imagination ran wild in the weeks after the strange machine showed up. But I kept coming back to the possibility of being a girl, and hating myself for being gross and perverse.

Chapter Two

That evening, we had a family movie night; we were watching *You Can't Take it With You*. Dad was really into old movies, and Mom liked them too although she wasn't as obsessed with trivia about long-dead actors and defunct studios. Mom was getting a headache, and she asked Dad to pause the movie, then asked me, "Could you go bring me the Tylenol out of my purse? It should be sitting on my chest of drawers."

"Sure," I said, and went to Mom and Dad's bedroom. Mom's purse was easy to spot, so it shouldn't have taken more than a few seconds. But I noticed the framed photo hanging over the chest of drawers, and paused for a moment.

It was a little girl, four years old, wearing a simple yellow dress with cartoon kittens on it. She was grinning broadly, and holding her little brother in her lap — Nathan was about a year and a half old in that picture. I hadn't seen that picture since the last time I'd had occasion to go in Mom and Dad's bedroom, however many months ago that had been, or thought about my sister Courtney for a long time, either. Mom and Dad didn't want visitors who hadn't known them for decades asking painful questions about her, so they only displayed her photos in their bedroom, and it had been a long time since they'd talked about her where I could hear.

She had died of a heart defect not long after that picture was taken, before I was born. When I was little, I

vaguely remembered that Mom and Dad had kept her bedroom the way it used to be — I remember being forbidden to go inside without one of them, but allowed to look at it sometimes. But not long after I started school, they'd cleaned it up, packed some of the things away in the attic and given away others. Her old room was now an office that Mom and Dad used when they had to bring work home.

I wasn't sure why I lingered to look at her photo, and then the other, taken when she was a few months old. After a few moments, I grabbed Mom's purse and dug through it for the bottle of Tylenol, returning with it to the living room. Nobody complained about me taking longer than necessary to find it, because Nathan had taken advantage of the pause to go to the restroom and he wasn't back yet.

Courtney's photos had almost reminded me of something, but I couldn't figure out what. I thought about it off and on in between watching the movie and getting ready for bed. And when I finally turned off the light and tried to sleep, for once I didn't have to focus on math or history to avoid fantasizing about turning into a dragon-girl. What was it I'd almost been reminded about? Some story Mom or Dad told me about Courtney, back when they'd talked about her more often? Something about her bedroom, back when it was preserved intact? Another photo I'd seen in an old photo album or in a PowerPoint slideshow Mom had made for our family at Christmas one year?

I thought, not for the first time but for the first time in a long while, about what it would have been like if she'd lived, if I'd had a big sister growing up as well as a big brother. Maybe not that much different; with the difference in our ages, as well as sexes, we might not have had that much to do with each other. Especially these days; she would have been a junior in college by now. Not to mention I had no idea what kind of person she'd have grown up to be. But I speculated baselessly for a while anyway. It was better than the *other* things that had occupied my thoughts in the last few weeks.

At some point, I decided to mentally reconstruct her bedroom from when I'd seen it as a kid. That wouldn't give me all that many clues to her personality, since Mom would have made most of the decorating decisions for her at that age, but I didn't have much else to go on — a few half-remembered anecdotes about cute things she'd done and said. I arranged things in my mental space: the low yellow chest of drawers there, the bed over there, with her favorite plushies lined up next to the pillows (otter, turtle, bear, pig — if Mom had ever told me what she'd called them, I didn't remember), the little shelf full of dolls and picture books, the toybox, the closet —

I gasped and started hyperventilating as the memory rushed back.

I don't know how old I was, but probably no older than Courtney was when she died — three or four, maybe five at most. I'd gone into her bedroom, though even then I must have known I wasn't supposed to, and instead of playing with the toys, like any normal kid would have done, I had opened the closet door and stared enraptured at the dresses. Finally I'd picked one out, a peach-colored one with ruffles at the hem. I'd taken off my shirt and shorts and put the dress on, looking at myself in the mirror.

Now that the memories had come back, I remembered the way I'd looked in the mirror better than the spanking I got afterward and way better than anything Mom or Dad had said to me about it. I'd looked like a girl with short hair. I remembered liking the way I'd looked, for however long it lasted before I got caught.

I couldn't remember what Mom or Dad had said, only their tone of voice and volume, but I could figure out what must have been the gist. Dresses are for girls, you're a boy, don't ever do that again, and so on. And also probably a lot of stuff about desecrating your poor sister's memory.

But I thought it through, and wondered what it meant. Wanting to turn into a girl wasn't some weird sexual perversion that I'd developed well into puberty. Or not only that. It was already there when I was little,

something I'd suppressed for a long time after that terrifyingly prolonged spanking and the weepy tirades from both parents. And little kids couldn't have sexual perversions. Back then, at least, my motive for wanting to wear Courtney's dress — to be like the girls I played with at preschool or kindergarten — must have been as pure as Meredith's motive for needing to be a girl, if not more so. It had gone wrong recently as it came back under these weird circumstances, but it was originally good.

I started crying, and fell asleep not long afterward.

* * *

The next day was Sunday, and after church, we went out to lunch with the Ramseys and with Crystal Southers, a lady probably six or seven years younger than Mom or Mrs. Ramsey, whose new boyfriend was attending church with her today. As usual, the kids ended up sitting at one end of the table and the adults at the other. Fortunately, Ms. Southers ended up sitting between me and Mom, with Dad even further up the table.

"I like your fingernails," I said to Meredith once we'd placed our drink orders. "I'm glad your parents are letting you use nail polish now." Her parents were fairly conservative, though not like mine, and had grounded her and her sister Sophia for using the machine without permission. But they were gradually starting to let up on Meredith and let her do feminine things.

"Thanks," she replied. "Sophia's friend Julianna did them."

Sophia put in, "Yeah, we had a sleepover to celebrate me not being grounded anymore."

"That's great!" I said. "I thought y'all were gonna be grounded for months, at least."

I had the fleeting thought that if Meredith's parents were easing up on her after just a few weeks of her being a girl, maybe it would *eventually* rub off on my parents and they'd consider letting me be a girl, too... if it weren't against policy at the Everett Academy to let kids come to school venened. But Meredith interrupted that thought, saying:

"No, *I'm* still grounded, it's just Sophia that's not grounded anymore. Mom and Dad let me hang out with Sophia and Julianna for a little while, but I couldn't watch movies or play games with them."

She went on to say she was still grounded for a month plus however long she stayed a girl, but the way her parents were acting in the last couple of weeks, she thought they'd let her off a lot earlier than that. After a little more of that, we talked about books we'd been reading for a little while.

After the waiter had brought our drinks and taken our meal orders, Meredith excused herself to go to the restroom. I kept talking with Sophia for a minute longer, but then the idea occurred to me that if I wanted to talk with Meredith alone, with no chance of anyone overhearing us, now was the time. I said I needed to go to the restroom too, and waited just outside the ladies' room. That restaurant had the restrooms separated from the dining area we were sitting in by a couple of partitions, so people at our table wouldn't be able to see, and even if someone from our table came to use the restroom, they wouldn't see me until they came around the corner into the restroom area, at which point it would probably look like I'd just come out of the men's room. I thought about what I wanted to say and how, and second-guessed myself a lot, almost going back to the table or ducking into the men's room to hide a couple of times. But finally Meredith came out of the ladies' room and I worked up the courage to say:

“Hey... I, uh, wanted to talk to you for a minute without other people around... if it’s okay...?”

“Sure,” she said. “What is it?”

“I, um, well... Nathan and I went to the library to do some research for school, and I convinced him to try out the trust booth. He turned me into a little dragon, about the size of a robin, I guess? And flying was really awesome, but we didn’t stay changed for very long because we had to get home, but I want to do it again, and to change into a more humanoid dragon next time, but... like, a girl dragon?” She nodded understandingly. “But I don’t think I can ask him.”

“You know him better than I do,” she said, “but he seems sort of okay with me being trans, so maybe he would be fine with you wanting to be a girl? Whether it’s just trying it out for a while, or for good. Is that a form you think you’d like to live with if your school would allow it and all?”

“I don’t know... maybe not. Ideally...” The ideal didn’t matter; what I could get away with was more important. “I guess I could be a human girl on weekdays and a dragon-girl on weekends? But there’s no way I can do that until I’m grown up and living somewhere else... And Nathan is nice to you in person, but you haven’t heard him talking about you behind your back. The way he and Dad were talking a few weeks ago, after they saw you for the first time after...” Meredith looked stricken when I said that, and I berated myself for gossiping about Dad and Nathan behind *their* backs.

Then she surprised me by grabbing me in a hug. It was more of a surprise because by that point I wasn’t looking at her; I was barely able to get the words out, eye contact was too much to expect.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said. “You might have to wait until you’re eighteen, or even a little longer, but then you can get exactly the body you want without spending thousands of dollars, begging a therapist for permission, or risking heart problems. We’ve got it a lot better than trans people used to, even if it’s still a long way from perfect.”

“Trans people.” That was what I was now, even though I hadn’t dared use the word for myself even in imagination. I’d just recently realized that I wanted to be a girl, or considered how much my motivations for wanting it might be similar to or different from Meredith’s. Now I had a label, and Meredith’s permission to use it. I wasn’t sure if I liked the fit of it, but it certainly sounded a lot nicer than what Nathan had called her last time he and Dad were gossiping about her.

“We’d better get back to the table,” she said, glancing toward the dining areas. “Just remember I’ve got your back. Whatever I can do...”

“Thanks. Uh, maybe we’d better go back separately?”

She let me go back first, and returned a minute or two later. We talked with Sophia some more about books we were reading and the topics we were doing term papers on, but I was pretty distracted and Meredith and Sophia had to hold up most of the conversation.

Chapter Three

Things got better for Meredith soon after that: her dad finally accepted that she was really a girl, and let her start wearing skirts and dresses and un-grounded her. She started dating a boy at her school not long after that, though I didn’t learn about it until later — she didn’t mention it at church until she’d been on a few

dates with him and they were steady girlfriend and boyfriend. And I didn't have a lot of opportunities to chat with her for the next few weeks anyway; we didn't go out to eat with the Ramseys for a while and there were a couple of Sundays when we or the Ramseys had to leave immediately after the service for some reason.

Meanwhile, I was brooding over that "trans" label Meredith had used for us. The only computer I was allowed to use, a desktop machine in the living room, was full of parental control software. I wasn't sure if "transgender" was on the keyword list blocked by the parental control software, either built-in or things Mom or Dad had added, but if it was, they'd find out that I had searched for information about that and I'd get an interrogation about it within hours. Instead, after some thought, I searched indirectly using phrases made of common words that couldn't be blocked, like "guys who turn into girls," "why do some boys want to be girls" and things like that, and then mostly only read the capsule page summaries or the Google cache, only clicking on a search result if I was confident the site it was on wouldn't be blocked.

What I learned was mostly either basic and oversimplified, or heavily biased against trans people. And without being able to talk privately with Meredith, or other trans people, I was left wondering if Meredith was wrong about me — about us — about thinking I was the same sort of person she was. I couldn't find anything about people who wanted to be inhuman creatures of the opposite sex. If I was transgender, I was probably a weird fringe kind of transgender. An outsider even in a group of outsiders.

And when I learned that Meredith was dating a guy, I had further second thoughts; I couldn't see myself doing that. I had been attracted to girls long before I realized I wanted to be one, and I still was. I was crushing on a girl in my homeroom, Elena, who probably didn't even know I existed, and I was starting to develop a crush on Meredith, too. And a few weeks later, at the grocery store, I saw Jada, the girl who'd squeed over me when I was a cute little dragon, shopping with a girl who might be her little sister and a woman who might be her older sister — or maybe her mom, rejuvenated with the Venn machine. I recognized Jada at once, although she had gotten vanned into a body with little pink snakes for hair that waved around sniffing with their forked tongues. Mom frowned at her in disapproval, and I had a hard time hiding my sudden erection from Mom and Jada both; I turned quickly aside so Jada wouldn't recognize me, and told Mom I needed to go to the restroom.

Were some trans women lesbians, if that was the right word for it? The parental control software wouldn't let me find out and I couldn't ask anyone. Not then.

Tim, my only friend at school, seemed to notice I was distracted and more anxious than usual. But he didn't have any better social skills than I did, and seemed helpless to know how to react. He responded by contributing more than his share of our lunchtime conversations, telling me endless plot summaries of the games he'd played and the anime he'd watched when he ran out of other things to say.

It was over a month after my talk with Meredith before we had another chance to talk privately, and then it was only for a minute or so. But she had a wonderful gift for me, which she slipped into my hand and said, "Use it when your parents aren't looking."

It was a USB flash drive which, when I had a chance to look at its contents without Mom or Dad around almost a week later, turned out to contain something called Tor Browser and a README file which was a note from Meredith. It was a tool for browsing the Internet privately and getting around local network censorship, such as Mom and Dad's parental control software. And she'd suggested that I use it to set up a new, more private web email account as well as search for information about being transgender without parental control censorship. We could talk privately by email even if our conversations at church were closely chaperoned.

I had a near escape when Mom came home earlier than I expected, closing the Tor Browser window just in time and switching over to the word processor where I was working on a term paper, then ejecting and pocketing the flash drive. After that I got more cautious about it, using my limited freedom sparingly and allowing a large margin of error for when I needed to shut it down and hide the flash drive.

And so I learned that yes, some trans women were lesbians — a lot, in fact, probably more than half. And some wanted to be something other than ordinary human women, though they’d long since learned not to say that to the therapists whose approval they used to need for hormone therapy and surgery. That wasn’t an issue anymore with more and more Venn machines popping up all over, though school and employer approval were still a constraint for a lot of people. Trans catgirls and other “furies” seemed to be a lot more common than “scalies” like me, and regular human trans people more common still, but I wasn’t alone.

The more I read, both on the websites I found and in Meredith’s long, patient emails answering my nervous, naive questions, the more cut off I felt from my family. I was wrestling with new ideas, that for instance I’d always been a girl even if I hadn’t realized it until quite recently, and that led to other related ideas and systems of ideas. I didn’t have anyone I could talk to about that except Meredith, and the only way I could talk privately with her was via email.

And before long, email was my *only* connection with Meredith.

* * *

It was not long before final exams and Christmas break when we went out to eat with the Ramseys after church again. I knew something was wrong when Dad said to me and Nathan on the way to the restaurant, “Boys, I want you two to sit at the end of the table next to your mother and me. Not with the Ramsey kids.”

We got to the steakhouse a few minutes before the Ramseys and arranged ourselves with me and Nathan at one end of the table and Mom and Dad next to us, so when the Ramseys arrived, after looking at the setup in puzzlement for a moment, they sat down with the parents next to Mom and Dad and their kids on the other side. I looked down the table at Meredith and Sophia, wanting to talk to them and not daring to say anything.

“This isn’t how we usually sit,” Mr. Ramsey said. “Why not let the kids sit next to each other, like usual?”

“I want them to listen to us,” Dad said, “not get engrossed in conversation with each other this time. Justin, back in September we expressed our concern about how you were dealing with [deadname]’s... acting out. You explained your reasons for not forcing him to change back —”

(I’m going to use [deadname] to represent Meredith’s deadname, and when I can’t avoid it any more, I’ll use it to represent my own deadname. I gave Meredith permission to use a fake deadname for me when she wrote her memoir, since I didn’t come out to anyone but her and had barely started to figure out what name I wanted to use during the time she was writing about, but it doesn’t feel right to use fake deadnames here.)

“Her,” Mrs. Ramsey interrupted quietly. Dad went on as if he hadn’t heard:

“— and we figured we’d give you a chance to see if it worked. But it’s clearly getting worse, not better. You’ve let him talk you into letting him wear dresses and makeup and jewelry, and now I hear he’s even gone on a date with a boy.”

“Four dates,” Meredith said defiantly.

“Meredith,” her mom said, “I’ll let you have the floor. You deserve a chance to respond to that. But let your father and me answer when you’re done. He’s attacking our parenting here, too.”

Meredith, encouraged, continued while I listened in awe and terror. “Hunter is a great boyfriend. He’s fun to talk with, and affectionate but respectful — he’s never pushed me to do anything I’m not comfortable with or anything Mom and Dad wouldn’t approve of. Mom and Dad have met his mom, and talked with his dad on Skype — he’s stationed in Afghanistan — and I’m sure if you had a daughter, you’d be fine with her dating him.” At that, Mom and Dad winced, and so did Meredith’s parents a moment later, and so did I, for different reasons. And I realized that Meredith probably didn’t know about my sister Courtney, who’d died as a toddler before I was born — we never talked about her with people outside the family, so only people who’d known Mom and Dad for decades like Meredith’s parents knew about her.

Meredith went on, seemingly oblivious: “So why shouldn’t I date him? You don’t think I’m really a girl, but Mom and Dad and my therapist all know me way better than you, and they all eventually figured it out. Not to mention all the people it was obvious to as soon as I pointed it out, like Sophia.” She nodded at her mom and dad, and her dad said:

“I didn’t get it at first, but Meredith has shown me I was wrong. I’m so glad we gave her the chance to show us who she is, instead of forcing her back into a boy shell. She’s so much happier since her change, not to mention doing much better in school. Erin and I wholeheartedly approve of her choice of a boyfriend. Please, Peter. Let this drop, for the sake of our friendship.”

Just then a waitress approached the table with a stack of menus, but she backed away slowly when Dad spoke up, raising his voice:

“I can’t be silent and watch you make a terrible mistake like this. You’re endangering your son’s immortal soul by indulging him like this, and other children, too, by setting such a bad example.”

“I don’t think so,” Mr. Ramsey said, louder than before but not as loud as Dad had just been. “God has shown me how miserable my daughter was before, and how blind Erin and I were to it, but even I can see she’s far happier now. I understand where you’re coming from — I was there a few months ago — but you need to let this rest. If you want to bring it up with me and Erin later, privately, and talk about what the Scriptures mean by ‘God created them male and female’, we can do that — but please don’t do this in front of the kids or in a public place. You’re embarrassing all of us.”

When he said that, I noticed that some of the diners at the nearby tables were staring at us, too. I wanted to sink into the floor and disappear, but I knew rationally that if people were staring, it was mostly at Dad and Mr. Ramsey, and maybe at Meredith.

“Can we have a conversation about something else now?” Mrs. Ramsey asked. “And please, let’s move around so the kids can sit next to each other. This is absurd.”

“I don’t think so,” Dad said, and got up. “Let’s go, Kathy, boys.” Mom, Nathan and I all jumped up and followed him; when Dad, Mom, and Nathan all had their backs to me, I risked an apologetic glance back at Meredith.

Chapter Four

We went to a different restaurant for lunch, just the four of us, but it was tense and nobody said anything except Dad and Mom, and they didn't say much. A few minutes after we ordered, but before our food arrived, Dad said in a low voice, "Maybe we shouldn't have walked out like that. I should have tried harder... I hate to end a friendship of twenty years like that, but they just weren't listening! At all!" He was raising his voice some near the end of that, though not yelling like he'd done at the steakhouse, and Mom put her hand on his.

"Since they weren't listening, there's probably not much more we could do," she said. "But we could send them a letter with the other stuff we were going to talk about."

"Yeah," Dad said. "I didn't even get a chance to offer our help to pay his tuition to a boarding school, or for conversion therapy."

I didn't know what conversion therapy was, but I looked it up the next time I had some private Internet time, and I was horrified. It seemed to be focused on "curing" gay kids — by giving them electric shocks while they looked at sexy pictures, apparently, so gay boys would associate sexy images of men with pain and misery, and similar for lesbian girls. I wasn't sure how they would try to cure being trans, but it was probably just as bad. If Dad felt strongly enough to pay for Meredith's tuition to a conversion camp, if the Ramseys couldn't afford it, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment to pack *me* off to one if he had the slightest suspicion I was trans, too. After that, I became even more paranoid about not letting Mom, Dad or Nathan see me reading anything gender-related.

When we finally got home, Mom said she had a headache and was going to take a nap, and Dad and Nathan started playing a basketball game on the console; I studied for finals for a while.

I'd figured out a way to spend more time corresponding with Meredith and studying gender issues and the Venn machines without spending too much time with incriminating displays on the monitor. I would copy Meredith's longer emails, and the contents of the crunchier web pages, into Word, reduce the font size to where it wouldn't be easy for Mom or Dad to read it unless they got right up next to me, and hide them at the ends of documents like school essays and term paper drafts. Sometimes I'd change the text color to match the background, so I could read it only when I selected the text and could unselect it to make it unreadable in a moment.

That afternoon, after trying to study for my history final and failing to concentrate, I went to the end of my term paper document and started drafting a letter to Meredith, which I'd email later — perhaps only having the flash drive plugged in and Tor Browser running for a few critical minutes. I apologized abjectly for what had happened that day; I felt guilty about not saying anything in Meredith's defense when Dad had gone on that tirade, and even though I knew that would almost certainly have made things worse for me and no better for Meredith, the guilty feeling still influenced the tone of that email.

"I'm so sorry for what Dad did. If I'd known he was planning that, I would have tried to warn you, but I don't think I could have done anything to stop him. While he was talking, part of me felt like I should say something, but I was too terrified to think of what to say, much less to say anything, and now, looking back, I guess it probably wouldn't have done any good anyway. You were great, and your parents are"

I got interrupted before I finished it, quickly Ctrl-Home'd to the part of the document with history notes, and didn't get a chance to finish or send it until a day or two later. A few days later, I got a reply from Meredith; I

copied it into a French notes document and read it later in snatches between study.

“Don’t beat yourself up over it, there was nothing you could do. I’m okay, and your dad going on a rant isn’t going to hurt me. You just need to keep your head down and stay safe until you can get out from under his thumb. I’m always here for you, but be careful and don’t check this email more often than you’re sure it’s safe.

“This isn’t the first time something like that’s happened, and your parents aren’t the only people at church that have talked to Mom and Dad or me like that, though your dad is probably the worst. So it’s been building up for a while, but I just found out for sure: we’re not going to Crossroads anymore. We left and went home for lunch, since Dad didn’t want to talk about stuff with all the waiters and customers having had their attention drawn to us, and then we talked about where else we might start going to church. I guess we’ll be visiting other churches for the next few weeks before we pick one. I’ve been looking into which churches are okay with trans people for a while, thinking long-term for after I turn eighteen and move out, but it’s suddenly become relevant *right now*.

“I hope you’re okay. Please be safe and take care of yourself.”

* * *

Things got worse after that. Mom and Dad hardly mentioned the Ramseys again, though I heard some other people at church gossiping about them occasionally. Nathan told me, one morning when he was giving me a ride to school the following semester, that he’d talked with Meredith’s older brother Caleb at the coffee shop, but didn’t plan to make a regular habit of it in case one of Mom or Dad’s friends might see them and report him. I wanted to ask him if Caleb had said anything about Meredith or Sophia, but I couldn’t get the words out, and after a few moments of me stammering, he took pity on me and said that Caleb said his sisters were doing pretty okay. “And they’re visiting a different church every Sunday, some of them in Catesville and one way down in Greensboro. Some of them are kind of screwy, it sounds like. He said the one they visited last Sunday had a lesbian pastor and ten or twenty people in the congregation were vanned into something weird.”

I’d pretty much given up on trying to convince myself I wasn’t trans by that point. I was still trying to convince myself that a girl body, whether human or dragon, was a “nice to have” rather than the burning need it had soon become once I’d started thinking about it. I debated for a while about telling my friend Tim, whom I saw every day at school, but I scratched that idea after a conversation we had one day in January.

He was telling me about an anime he’d been watching — I don’t remember which one. I had a hard time remembering Japanese titles, and I didn’t get a chance to see much anime myself until later. Mom and Dad didn’t approve of it, and when I went over to Tim’s house, his mom respected my mom’s wishes on the subject. Anyway, there was a character in this show that, reading between the lines of what Tim was saying, seemed to me to be trans — they were under a curse where they turned into a girl at the most inconvenient

times, and put on an unconvincing show of being upset about it but at times seemed to really enjoy it. In the process of giving me a rambling, confusing plot summary, Tim tossed in a few bigoted remarks about trans people. I made the mistake (or so it seemed at the time) of objecting to that kind of language, and we got into an argument. I hadn't said very much before I realized it was really stupid to give any hint that I was interested in this stuff, lest it get back to my parents somehow, and I backed down after just a few minutes. "Never mind," I said. "You were telling me about that show...?"

That was the beginning of the end of our friendship, though I tried to keep treating him the same, especially since his mom was giving me rides home from school on days when Nathan had football practice. But I couldn't forget what he'd said and by the end of February, we weren't really friends anymore.

I tried to participate in the trans teens' chatroom that Meredith recommended, but my chances to use the Internet privately were so infrequent and so brief that it was hard to participate in conversations or make friends when you could only pop up in those social media for an hour or two a week at most. But through the chatroom I acquired a few email pen-pals, particularly Tatiana, a sixteen-year-old who'd already started getting HRT with her parents' help before the Venn machines showed up. I also exchanged a few emails with Meredith's non-binary friend Carmen, the only other local trans person she knew; they were a senior at the other public high school in the western end of Mynatt County, and Meredith had met them when they both testified at a school board hearing on the Venn machines. Between them, Meredith, Carmen and Tatiana kept me sane during the long, dry months that followed.

Nathan and I found a chance to use the Venn machine exactly once in the next six months. One Saturday in March, Nathan turned me into a little dragon again, and I turned Nathan into a falcon. It was fun at first, flying around together, but then Nathan started flying faster and farther afield, letting his falcon instincts take over, and despite trying to follow him, I lost him, and headed back to the library. I found a lost penny in the parking lot, fortunately, and picked it up in my claws (which took several tries), then got in line for the machine.

Once I was in my usual body again, I hung out in the library parking lot, hoping and hoping that Nathan would show up again so I could get him into the machine and change him back. I tried to think of some way to find Nathan and capture him or talk some sense into him, but if I couldn't keep up with him in my tiny dragon body, my human boy body had no chance. Even if I illegally drove Nathan's car around with my limited learner permit, how could I tell if I'd found him and not some random falcon? And how could I catch him?

Nathan didn't show up, and didn't show up, and didn't show up. Finally, more than an hour after we were supposed to be home, I came up with an idea that would maybe salvage something from the situation. I went inside and asked the librarians for permission to use their phone to call my parents.

"What do you mean, Nathan went off and left you there?" Dad roared. "Stay put, I'll be right there."

I hated to hang Nathan out to dry, but I couldn't think of anything else to do. With Nathan lost for the next six hours, and probably needing to beg a ride home from wherever he was when he turned back, at least *one* of us was going to be in enormous trouble. And I guessed that Nathan would be in somewhat less trouble for going off and leaving me alone at the library than for using the Venn machine with me. I was going to be in enough trouble for covering for him and not calling until well after we were supposed to be home rather than right after he "ran off and left me alone."

That evening, Nathan ended up having to climb down from the tree he found himself in and hike a mile or so until he got to an area with better cell phone reception. He called his friend Christopher and got a ride back to

the library, from which he drove home to face the music. While I was waiting for Dad, I'd borrowed a cell phone from one of the people waiting in line to send Nathan a text, telling him about my plan, so he would know what story to stick to. He was a little mad at me, but later said he couldn't figure out what else I could have done, and he mostly blamed the unknown makers of the Venn machines for making that falcon body so confusingly immersive.

"You're stronger-willed than I thought, turning into an animal like that and not succumbing to its instincts. Didn't think you had it in you, bro. I didn't realize how impressive an accomplishment that was. But don't push your luck again."

Later on, I found out that people changing into new types of bodies — not natural creatures — had more trouble getting the hang of their new limbs and senses at first, like I had the first time, but were in little or no danger of losing control to their animal instincts, because they usually didn't have any. Whereas people who changed into naturally-occurring animals didn't have as much trouble learning to fly, for instance, or navigate by bat sonar or track things by scent, but tended to succumb to instinct, especially the first time they changed into a particular kind of animal.

Mom and Dad grounded me for a week, for not tattling on Nathan sooner, and Nathan for a month and a half — right up until his eighteenth birthday. And I didn't get a chance to use a Venn machine again for months.

Chapter Five

Finally, in April, I turned sixteen and got my provisional driver's license. Mom and Dad gave me a used Corolla and a cellphone for my birthday. Possibilities opened up of going off on my own to meet someone at the library and venn into what I wanted to be, or something close to it. But the next few weeks were busy with studying for finals and finishing term papers, and then, once the school year ended, Mom and Dad wanted me to get a job, so I was busy with job-hunting for a while, online and in person. I ended up getting a job at Subway a few weeks later.

I asked Meredith if she could meet up with me at the library sometime, and she was willing, but figuring out when was tricky. She was also looking for a summer job, and unlike me, her parents hadn't gotten her a car when she turned sixteen, so she was limited to times when she could borrow a car or get a ride from Caleb or one of her parents. She hoped to save enough over the summer to buy a cheap used car, but it wound up being several weeks later when our work schedules, Meredith's dates with Hunter, and her opportunities to borrow her mom's car all lined up. More than once, she emailed me with a proposed date and time, and I didn't get a chance to check my private email until after it had passed.

But finally, early one evening in July, we met up at the library. I had just gotten off work, and was still wearing my work uniform; Meredith hadn't been off work for long either. She was standing near the people who were lined up to use the Venn machine, stunningly pretty in a yellow sundress and sandals. I had been corresponding with her once or twice a week for months, but I hadn't seen her in way too long, and the sight of her hurt in a good way.

"Hi!" she called out. "I was afraid you might not make it."

"My manager kept me a few minutes late," I said. "I would have texted you, but..."

Of course my new cellphone had parental control software on it too. I wasn't sure exactly what all it could

do, but I was pretty sure Mom and Dad got copies of all my texts and a list of the numbers I called or got calls from.

We got in line with the others. “It’s been so long,” Meredith said. “Are you doing okay?”

“I’m doing a lot better today than for the last few months.” Part of me was saying I should tell her plainly how bad my anxiety had been lately, and another part, of course, was saying (as it had every time I’d written an email since December) that I shouldn’t burden Meredith with my problems. A public-facing job was not a great fit for me, though it wasn’t like this job at Subway had been my first, second, or tenth choice. I hoped my anxiety might go away, or diminish a lot, after I was able to live as a girl full-time. Some people said once your dysphoria was treated, your other mental problems often got better too.

She smiled, despite looking a little worried. “Yeah. I know this is only going to be for a couple of hours, but it’ll be a taste of what you can have all the time, later on. You just have to be patient.”

“Yeah,” I said.

The line wasn’t all that long on a weekday evening, and less than ten minutes later, I was sticking a dime in the slot and pushing the eight hours icon. We’d discussed this and done research ahead of time, and Meredith had confirmed that as long as I didn’t push any buttons on my side of the interface, Meredith’s three-year countdown for her vanned transition wouldn’t be affected by my eight-hour change.

I handed Meredith my wallet, phone and keys to keep in her purse, and we went into the booths. Once we were out of earshot of the people who’d gotten in line behind us, Meredith took her phone out of her purse, brought up my last email, and read aloud the latest description of my dragon-girl body.

“A female humanoid dragon with leaf-green scales, five feet six inches high, with a seven-foot wingspan with wings unfolded, but more like two feet when folded up. Also normal human color vision.”

She paused and studied the images that had popped up as she’d spoken.

“Okay, several of these look good... some aren’t wearing clothes, but probably should... only a few have breasts, or maybe pseudo-breasts because some of them don’t have nipples... some have more human hands and some are more claw-y.”

“Do you see one that’s wearing a nice dress or a blouse and skirt, and has breasts or at least a feminine figure, and more humanoid hands? The feminine figure is the most important part.”

She scanned over the display. “Not all at once. This one’s closest.” She picked one and then studied the variations on it that appeared in place of the other bubbles. A minute later, after she asked me some more questions to decide between options, I felt the change.

I raised my new scaly arms and hands to look at them. The nails were longer than most women’s, and sharper, but they were definitely hands with an opposable thumb and a generally human shape. I twisted my head to get a look at my wings, and couldn’t really see much. In the process, I unfolded them without meaning to, and they immediately ran into the space limits of the booth, which hurt a little. “Ow,” I said, but the joy I felt at the feminine sound of my voice drowned out the little bit of physical pain from my wingtips.

“You look awesome,” Meredith said. “But maybe try folding them up again? The door will open in less than a minute.”

“Sure,” I said as I tried to do so, but when the door opened, I was still trying to get the hang of it. Meredith came around to my booth and came in to help me guide my wings into position, which helped, and I was finally able to walk out of the booth, letting the next people in line have their turn.

I didn't have any trouble walking, unlike when I'd first turned into a little quadrupedal dragon, only with controlling my wings. Meredith and I walked over to the edge of the library parking lot, away from the other people, and I practiced folding and unfolding my wings until I could do it consistently, and avoid unfolding them when I didn't mean to.

After that, we went into the library and to the ladies' room. Meredith led the way in and I hesitated before following her, then reminded myself that I was obviously a girl now, and if anybody objected it would be because I was a dragon, not because I was "really" a boy. And I'd seen people with weird inhuman-looking bodies in the library before, though rarely as extreme as mine.

Once inside, I looked in the mirror. The green scales I'd seen on my hands and arms covered every part of me that wasn't concealed by the light purple dress I was wearing, including my head, whose mouth and nose were more like a snout than a human face. I had no hair, but there were two rows of spines on my scalp, darker green than the rest of me. My dress seemed to hide a pair of modest-sized breasts, but I found out later that they had no nipples, which was fine with me. I had a hard time rationalizing why I thought my dragon-girl form should have breasts, but having vaguely breast-like protrusions with no nipples seemed, at the time, like a good compromise between what I wanted and what I could make sense of. The dress was backless, giving plenty of room for the enormous wings, dark green like my head-spines, currently folded up into a small width — though they protruded vertically above my head and below my knees.

"You're really pretty," Meredith said admiringly. "Is that what you wanted?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's pretty close, anyway. Certainly a lot better than what I used to look like."

"Do you want to go out and do some things?"

"Sure."

We tried getting into Meredith's mom's car, but my wings, even folded, wouldn't fit comfortably. So we ended up walking a couple of blocks to the coffee shop instead. They had a reputation for being friendly to vanned customers, though at the moment I was the only obviously vanned customer there. By sitting on the edge of my seat to give my folded wings room, I managed to get comfortable enough to relax and talk, trying to figure out how to drink my hot chocolate with this unfamiliar snout.

"So have you thought any more about a new name?" Meredith asked.

"Um, yeah... that doesn't mean I've decided, though."

Since not long after I'd realized I was transgender, I'd been thinking about what kind of name I'd want once I was able to live as a girl, human or dragon. I'd spent some time on baby name websites, looking up the meanings and origins of names, but that hadn't helped as much as I'd expected, though it had ruled out a few.

"Yeah... I guess there's no big hurry on making a final decision. Unless things change drastically, you've got a lot more time to decide before you need to file the name change paperwork and all. But... it would be kind of convenient if you would maybe pick a name just for today? I could call you something else later if you decide you don't like it and want to try something else."

I stared at her, stunned. "Yeah! That's probably just what I need. Hearing somebody else say the name — call me by it — to really figure out if I want to use it. Um — okay, let's try Natalie." That was one of four or five names I'd been leaning toward lately.

"Pleased to meet you, Natalie."

I felt a warm glow in my cheeks and, oddly enough, my wingtips. Did that mean I'd stumbled onto the right

name the first time? Or — no, I decided, it was just because I was being called by a *girl name* for the first time.

By a girl I still had a crush on, even though she had a steady boyfriend she'd been dating for months. And had never been attracted to girls in the first place.

After a few seconds, I got enough control of my emotional roller-coaster to reply, "Thanks." I took another sip of my chocolate to give myself more time to think of something else to say. Oh, right. "I like it when you call me that, but I'm not sure how much of it is because it's the first time anybody's called me by a girl name, or how well that particular name fits."

"Do you want to try on some more now?"

"...No, maybe next time. I hope we can get together like this several times a year, at least, and that will let us try out several names and probably figure out which one fits best. I guess I want to hear you use it in several different contexts?"

"Hmm," she said. "That brings up something I've been meaning to ask you."

"What?"

"Is it okay if I tell Sophia about you? Maybe bring her along next time we meet?"

I knew Sophia pretty well, though not as well as I knew Meredith by this point, and I knew that she'd accepted Meredith as trans from the moment she came out. I knew Sophia would treat me like a girl, if anybody would. But I still had an instinctive terror at the idea of revealing myself to anyone else.

"...Maybe? I mean, yeah, I know she'll be okay with me being a girl, and probably with me being a dragon-girl, but... are you sure she can keep the secret? You came out to everybody right after you came out to her, so her ability to keep her mouth shut wasn't exactly tested then."

"Well... she actually suspected you were trans before I did, several weeks before you came out to me."

"What."

"I think it was the first time our families went out to eat together after I transitioned? I don't remember all the details of that conversation, but Sophia heard you say something that made her think you might be trans, and she's never told anyone about her suspicions except me. We haven't talked about it in a while now."

That was well before *I'd* realized I was trans, either.

"Let me think about it, okay? I can't say why I'm reluctant for you to tell her, I just..."

"Sure, take as much time as you like. If you never want to tell her until you tell everyone, that's fine too."

"Thanks."

We talked about other things for a while. I mentioned what Tatiana had told me about the transphobic bullying she'd experienced at school in the first year or so after she started transitioning, and asked Meredith if she'd experienced the same thing.

"Not nearly as much," she said. "I guess the fact that the Venn machine made me pass perfectly headed off a lot of that. And once the girls at school found out I was having my period, well, most of the few who hadn't started treating me as a girl already did after that." She mused for a few moments and added: "And the fact that a bunch of other students were transforming in various ways helped me blend in, too. Even though nobody else was coming out as trans and venning long-term into an affirming body, everybody heard rumors

about couples who'd swapped sexes for the weekend or just a few hours. Mostly juniors and seniors, but that just made me seem more mature."

That reminded me of something I'd thought of earlier. "Some of the articles I read said that around one in three hundred people are trans. Doesn't it seem odd that you're the only one at Eastern Mynatt High?"

"Yeah, but those figures are for adults, or an average for people of all ages. At our age, most trans kids probably haven't figured out yet that they're trans. And there might be some who have parents like yours — or mine, before I spent some time educating them and wearing down their resistance — so they've decided not to come out until they're older." Her eyebrows rose. "I bet some of the kids who've swapped sexes for the weekend, 'Just to see what it's like,' are trans and don't know it or aren't ready to tell people."

"Yeah, probably."

We finished our tea and hot chocolate and walked around downtown for a while, chatting about books and movies and our crappy entry-level service jobs. But my mind lingered on our earlier conversation, and I thought more about whether to trust Sophia and about whether any other kids at the Everett Academy hadn't realized they were trans, or knew and were afraid to tell anyone. We were a lot smaller than Eastern Mynatt High — only around five hundred students total, and that included all twelve grades plus kindergarten, if I remembered right. So the odds were pretty small that there was more than one other trans student there, and most likely they were younger than me and hadn't figured it out. Or it could easily be that I was the only one.

That made me feel even more alone when I thought about it again later, but at the time I was too happy to be a dragon-girl having a girls' day out with Meredith to feel the emotional impact of that calculation.

Finally, after an hour and a half or so, we headed back to the library for me to change back. When Meredith finished telling me another "the customer is always right" anecdote about her job at the Fisherman's Cove, I said, "I've made up my mind. You can tell Sophia about me, and if it suits, I guess she can come next time we get together. But make her promise not to tell anybody, and make sure nobody overhears you, okay?"

"I'll be careful," she promised.

I got a little nervous when we got near the head of the line for the Venn machine, which fortunately wasn't very long, hoping nobody who knew me would see a dragon-girl go in and my wretched boy-self come out. I was ready to bail and come get in line again in half an hour if anybody who even *resembled* somebody from school or church walked toward or out of the library, much less got in line for the Venn machine. But nobody did, and a few minutes later I was on my way home, feeling more uncomfortable with my body than ever.

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