

The Puzzle-Box Girl

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by Trismegistus Shandy and Skylar

Content Warnings

internalized transphobia, gender dysphoria, imposter syndrome, panic attack, mannequin transformation, animal transformation, robot transformation, merged bodies, split selves, temporary detransition (lasting just a minute or two), sex (not very explicit), bodily functions, altered states of consciousness

Foreword and Acknowledgements

This novel started as a roleplay chat February 2024, then we put it through a few drafts to make it a more readable narrative between March and July 2024, but you can maybe still see the skeleton of the RPG in the plot structure. And in the present-tense narration, which I rarely use otherwise; it seemed like an unnecessary hassle to rewrite in past tense. It was serialized on Scribblehub between November 2024 and March 2025.

Thanks to dkfenger for creating the Trust Machines setting and letting other authors play in it, and for feedback on the second draft. Thanks also to PollyChrome for beta reading.

- <https://www.deviantart.com/dkfenger/gallery/>
- <https://www.deviantart.com/trust-machines>
- <https://www.scribblehub.com/profile/26947/pollychrome/?sp=1>

This novel is set in the same small town as my previous Trust Machines novels *Pioneers* and *Wings*, and shares some characters with them; it wouldn't hurt to read *Wings* first, but I don't think it should be necessary.

- <https://www.scribblehub.com/series/144233/pioneers/>
 - <https://www.scribblehub.com/series/531681/wings/>
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Chapter One

Sean's family has just moved in the middle of the spring semester of his senior year, which kind of sucks. Going from Chicago, where he's lived all his life, to this tiny town in North Carolina which he associates with occasional visits to Grandma, has been a huge adjustment to make.

But Grandma is gone now, and Mom has inherited her house – free and clear of any mortgage, Grandma paid it off years ago. And with Dad on disability now and Mom not working as many hours because of needing to help him out and take him to rehab appointments, they really needed to move into Grandma's rent-free, mortgage-free house and live in a tiny town where the cost of living is a fraction of what it was in Chicago. He understands why it was necessary.

The high school is smaller than his old one, which makes it a bit easier to learn his way around, though not as small as he expected. But what he didn't expect was that it would be a lot weirder.

Where his old high school had a handful of kids who had gotten prettier, slimmer or more muscular using the Venn machines, which he'd heard about but never seen – they didn't seem to be one anywhere in Chicago or the inner suburbs – here there are a dozen or more who've vanned into completely nonhuman forms, probably a hundred plus with visible differences from human baseline like extra arms or tall rabbitlike ears, and the teachers and principal apparently don't have a problem with it. It's exactly the opposite of what he expected when they moved to Mom's tiny southern home town. And now that he sees how much wonderful weirdness his fellow students are getting away with, he wants in on it.

Problem is, you need a friend to use the Venn machine. It only works if two people are operating it, from what he's heard. And he has no friends here. Not that he had any close friends back in Chicago, either.

But one day he's studying in the library during his free period, and notices the posters from winning science fair projects of the last few years. The photos on one of the posters catch his eye, and he stops to look closer before heading to his next class.

The girl who did this project, Sophia Ramsey, has been experimenting with what the Venn machines can do. Specifically, how they can turn a person into a living doll or statue.

Something inside him stirs, a vague fantasy that he never thought could be real, even after the earth-shattering news of the Venn machines and how they can make old people young again, turn people into catfolk, even bring people from the dead. He has to talk to this Sophia Ramsey, push past his shyness and take a chance that she might be willing to at least tell him more about this.

So the next day he pays closer attention in every class as roll is called, listening for her name. You would think, with a high school this size, he must share at least one class with her – if she hasn't already graduated. Based on the information on the poster, he thinks she should still be here unless she's such a genius that she started college a year or two early. He finally hears her name called in his last class of the day, World History, and quickly checks to see what she looks like. Surprisingly human, given the little he knows about her.

But he doesn't get a chance to talk to her after class; by the time he works up the nerve to approach her, she's on her way out the door, and he loses sight of her in the hall before he can catch up with her.

The next day at lunch, he looks around and sees where she's sitting. This time he's going to actually talk to her.

"Hey, uh, I saw your project poster and it was really interesting. I just moved here, but I've never seen a Venn machine, and I didn't realize they could do that."

"Oh, hey. Yeah, they're pretty awesome, aren't they? Did you have any questions about my project?"

"Uh, I kinda wanted to try the machines myself, but I don't know anyone here yet really. I was hoping you could help me, being the expert and all."

Sophia gives him a speculative look for a long moment before replying, "Sure, we could meet up this weekend maybe? The nearest machine is at the public library in downtown Brocksboro; do you know where that is?"

“I think so. I can always use GPS. Thanks so much.”

They talk for a couple of minutes and decide on a time, and then Sean off goes to eat by himself.

Saturday afternoon, Sean drives into the library parking lot and finds a space. The machine is pretty obvious, sitting on the lawn just to the left of the main entrance to the library. There are several people in line; Sophia is sitting on a bench nearby, with another girl who looks kind of like her, both of them reading books.

“Hey, Sophia. So this is it, huh.” Nervousness and excitement struggle for the top spot on his emotional chart.

“Hey, Sean, this is my sister Meredith. She goes to UNC Chapel Hill, but she’s home for a visit this weekend.” Meredith waves. “Let’s get in line. You want to let Meredith hold your ID and stuff so it doesn’t get vanned with you?” Sophia hands her purse and book to Meredith.

“Yeah, sure. Sounds good. Nice to meet you, Meredith.”

So Sean gives Meredith his phone, keys and wallet, and he and Sophia get in line. Directly in front of them, there are two women in their twenties; Sean overhears them talking about things they might transform each other into. It sounds like they’re considering several types of anthropomorphic animals.

“So I never did ask you – what do you want me to vnn you into?” Sophia asks.

“Oh. I guess I hadn’t thought of that. I always loved stories about mannequin transformations. They were the first transformation stories I found online. I was always curious what that would be like.”

“Okay, I can do that. What do you want your mannequin body to look like? Masculine, feminine, androgynous...?”

“Huh. I’m not sure. How about you decide the look that makes me look best, however that is.”

Sophia looks contemplatively at him. “Okay, I’ll come up with something cool.”

A few minutes later, it’s their turn to enter the machine. Sophia puts a penny in the slot, and slice-of-Earth, Earth, moon, and sun buttons appear.

“How long do you want to change for?” Sophia asks. “The minimum is eight hours, but of course you can go back in to change back early if you want.”

“Hmm. How about for the weekend. So two days?”

“Two days from now would be Monday afternoon, after we need to be back at school. So it’s a good thing you’ll still be able to move and talk and all.” She presses the Earth button twice and then enters the left-hand booth; Sean hesitates a moment before going into the one on the right.

As soon as he’s in, the doors close, and Sophia starts muttering under her breath, looking at him – or rather the screen on the other side – and touching spots on the screen. He can see Sophia on the big screen the size of the whole wall, and here and there are little round windows with images of Sophia in different clothes, taller, shorter, darker-skinned, more androgynous, male, older, with antlers... .

“Do you have a thing for antlers? There are a bunch of different options, but that one seems kinda odd.”

“Ooh, I haven’t had antlers before. But are they too big to fit into a car seat?”

“Not sure. Depends how tall the car or antlers are.”

“Hmm. Go ahead and tap that picture, but don’t press the green button – you should get more variations of me with antlers. Pick one of the ones with smaller antlers where my face isn’t too different.”

“Okay, will do.”

“... All right, I’m ready to transform you. You ready with mine?”

“Yep.”

Sean presses his green button, and Sophia presses hers a bare moment later. Suddenly he feels different. He was only subconsciously aware of his blood circulating, the pulse subliminally audible in his ears, but it's conspicuous by its absence now. He's not breathing, either. He looks down at plastic hands, emerging from slender arms encased in a long-sleeved lacy white top; three plastic breasts create three small bulges in the top, with two little boob windows between them. Below the waist, he's wearing a long black pleated skirt.

"I know you're kind of in shock, but we need to clear out and let the next couple of people use the machine," Sophia says with a giggle. She's running her hands over her antlers as she steps outside.

"Okay, then."

The next couple of people in line are two women, one black and one white; they applaud, and the black girl says, "Nine points for creativity." Sophia grins and heads over toward Meredith; Sean follows.

"You want to go in the library restroom and take a look in the mirror?" she asks.

"Yeah. I'd like that."

Sophia gets her purse back from Meredith, and tells her, "We're going inside to let Sean look in the mirror." She turns and enters the library doors; the restrooms are off to the right just past the checkout desk. Sophia goes into the ladies' room; after a moment of hesitation, Sean follows her in.

He stops in front of the first mirror he comes to. His new face is kind of androgynous, with short red hair in a pixie cut. The eyes look like glass, tinted green. There's a seam on either side of his jaw, and another around his neck. Pulling up his sleeves, he finds more seams at his wrists and elbow, in addition to seams at every finger joint.

Peeking under his lace top, he finds that his breasts have no nipples. Another woman comes into the room before he works up the courage to lift his skirt.

"The hair is a wig; you can swap it out for another one if you have one," Sophia says.

"That's so cool!"

Sophia smiles at him. At her? No, at him – right?

"Can I ask about everything you did and why, Sophia? I'm curious what your thought process was."

"Well, when I asked what gender presentation you wanted, you didn't give me a definite answer. Which I thought might mean you wanted to try a fem or androgynous body, but were afraid to ask. So that explains the overall figure. The separable wig is something I've been experimenting with, statue and doll bodies with separable parts. I've got a design for a Mx. Potato Head kind of body with a box of extra parts, but it's not ready for prime time yet. Last time I tried it, Julianna said she could feel all the parts at once, including the ones in the box, and it was too confusing.

"As for the three boobs, that was just a bit of silliness."

"It's cute. I like it. The seams especially are so cool!"

"Oh, and if you push up on your middle boob, your chest will swing open." She taps him on the shoulder, making a hollow sound. "Gives a new meaning to hiding something in your cleavage."

"Oh, that's cool. I gotta try that."

The other woman comes out of the stall she was using and starts washing her hands next to him.

"Is there anything else you did? Before I try out my chest?"

"That's pretty much it for the special features. But I'm thinking next time I should give you storage compartments in your arms, too. Those would be easier to get to without taking off your top. Ooh, or I could make your top part of the door to your chest cabinet? It would be hard to change clothes that way, though, and that's what a mannequin is for, kind of."

“Yeah that’s true. There’s two things I wanna check. One, I wanna see what’s under my skirt. I’m just nervous to look. . .”

“You should probably go in the stall for that,” Sophia says, glancing at the woman sloooooowly washing her hands, obviously eavesdropping.

“Alright, then. I will.”

He closes the stall door behind him and hesitates a moment before pulling his top over his head. He’s not wearing a bra under it; these rigid breasts don’t need one. Then, wishing he could take a deep breath, he pulls down his skirt.

His crotch is as smooth and featureless as a Barbie doll. He runs a hand along his butt and finds that it’s not so featureless, but its crack is shallow.

There are seams running down either side of his torso under his arms, one around his waist, and one running along his upper chest above his breasts. He gingerly touches his middle breast, finding it’s no more sensitive than his other parts, and pushes upward. There’s a click and his chest pops open, the seam under his right arm forming the hinge of its door.

It’s hard to get a good look inside without a mirror, but he feels around inside and finds shelves about six inches apart.

That’s weird.

“I wonder what it would feel like if I put something that vibrates in here and left it on?”

“What about set your phone on vibrate, put it in there, and let me call you?” Sophia says from outside the stall.

“Alright. Let’s try it.”

He puts his phone on one of the lower shelves and carefully closes the door. It clicks shut. Sophia asks for his number, and a few moments later, he feels the vibration all over his chest and to a slightly lesser extent in his head and legs.

“Ooo. . . Wow!”

“What’s that feel like?” Sophia asks.

“It’s weird. It’s kind of like when there’s a bass-heavy song at a rock concert and you can feel it vibrating your organs?” he says after a moment’s thought. “Except not that strong, and I guess I don’t have organs. It feels different in my chest versus my head and legs, I guess ’cause the chest is hollow and the other parts are solid?”

“Huh. I wouldn’t know – I’ve never been to a concert that loud. Just Christian bands playing at church, going to see The Nutcracker when we visited my aunt and uncle and cousins in Atlanta, things like that. I wanted to go see Bulletproof Sombbrero when they played in Greensboro last year, but I was dumb and didn’t buy a ticket early enough.”

“It would be cool if I could put stuff in here for storage without having to take my shirt or blouse off to open it.”

“Yeah, we’ll fix that in the next version. I’ve got some ideas. But you want to get out of here and hang out somewhere? Like the coffee shop over on Main Street or the park a couple of blocks south of here?”

“Hmm, maybe the coffee shop to start.”

“All right. Are you decent? Not that it would matter, probably, you being a mannequin and all, but the cops around here are just as bad as everywhere else and I wouldn’t put it past them to arrest you for indecent exposure just for kicks.”

“Hang on a sec. . .” He closes his chest door and puts the blouse and skirt back on. “Yeah, I’ve got everything back in place.”

Sean opens the stall door, and he and Sophia leave the library and join Meredith where she's been sitting on the bench. She looks up from her book and says, "Y'all ready to go?"

"Yep," Sean says.

"Yeah," Sophia says. "We were going to the coffee shop, if you want to come." Meredith looks at Sean for a moment and says, "Sure."

The coffee shop is across the railroad tracks and two blocks down the street. It's not very busy. Meredith orders a hot chocolate, and Sophia a black coffee. She looks at Sean. "I guess you can't – oh, wait. What if you put something warm in your chest cabinet?"

"Let's try that, I guess."

Sean looks for the cheapest hot drink on the menu, which turns out to be a black coffee. Once they've all got their drinks, Meredith and Sophia find a table, while he heads back to the restroom to have privacy to open his chest cabinet. But the cup in his hands doesn't feel as warm as he would expect fresh coffee to feel, and once it's in his cabinet, it still only feels lukewarm. Maybe this body isn't as sensitive to temperature differences as a flesh body? Once he's shut his cabinet and put his top on, he joins Meredith and Sophia at the table. They stop talking as he arrives.

"What were you two talking about?"

"I was telling her about your cabinet," Sophia says.

"Oh yeah. It's cool."

"Sounds interesting," Meredith says. "I don't think I'd like a body like that long-term, though. Most of the animated doll or statue bodies I've worn while helping Sophia with her research have been less sensitive than human or other fleshy bodies. How are you finding it?"

"It's really cool. I wish I could help with research for that stuff. I'd love to be able to try all those things."

"Great!" Sophia says. "I can always use more guinea pigs. My formal science project for the year was over a couple of weeks ago, but I'm going to keep researching Venn transformations for the rest of the semester and all summer. There's a lot more to learn about it."

"I'll need you to sign a release form, though, if we're doing formal experiments. Just to have handy in case someone questions me about experimenting on human subjects."

"Sure, I can do it now. I'd even be open to doing it this weekend if you wanted. It just sounds so exciting."

"I don't have a form with me, I'll have to go home and print out another one. Let's just hang out and socialize for a while, and next weekend we can meet up to do a few experiments."

"Sure."

Meredith speaks up. "Sophia told me you'd never seen a Venn machine before you moved here. Where'd you move here from?"

"I'm from Chicago. I'd only read about them, or seen them on the news a couple of times."

"Yeah," Sophia says, "seems like they only appeared in small towns at first, and then midsize towns and small cities. I figure they'll start showing up in big cities like Chicago or New York eventually, but it might take several more years."

"Yeah."

"Any particular reason you asked Sophia to make you a girl mannequin?" Meredith asks. "It's cool, I'm just wondering if there's a particular interest or goal you had in mind."

"Um... well, technically I didn't specify gender. I let Sophia decide. But um, I dunno, I'm not really sure about gender. It's weird and I feel like I just don't fit in as a guy, but I don't know what I am."

Meredith nods. “It took me a while to figure out my gender, too. I’d decided I was probably a trans girl by the time I was fourteen, but I didn’t know absolutely for sure until Sophia vanned me into this body and it felt so right. But my friend Carmen is non-binary, and they had to try out several intersex and neuter variations before they found one that felt right.”

“Can I hug you, Meredith? I dunno, it just feels right to do.”

“Of course!” She stands up and holds out her arms; Sean stands up and embraces her. The coffee has slowly heated his whole body up by a couple of degrees, but he’s still cooler than flesh; she feels slightly warm, though not as much as the coffee cup did.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you,” she says. “I hadn’t had a hug today yet, either.”

“If I could, I would probably be crying.”

“Would you want to try out some more gender-bendy stuff next time we meet up to venn?” Sophia asks. “Like in addition to the experimental venns, or alongside them?”

“Yeah. I would.”

“Any particular body features or overall body type you have in mind you’d like to try out?”

“I’m not sure. I love how this body is, and I want to see what you can create. You seem to be good at this.”

“So I’ve got a license to go wild and see what sticks,” Sophia says with a mad scientist gleam in her eye. She rubs her hands together and cackles maniacally. Or tries to.

“No, this is how you do a mad scientist laugh,” Meredith says. “Muahahaha!” she laughs, throwing back her head and raising her hands. The other patrons at nearby tables stare unabashedly.

Sean laughs. “But yeah. I trust you, Sophia.”

“If you want, I could pass your number along to Carmen?” Meredith asks. “You might have a lot in common with them.”

“Yeah. I’d love to meet them too.”

She takes out her phone and starts typing a text. “What’s your phone number?” Sean gives her the number.

Chapter Two

After another half hour or so of chatting, Meredith and Sophia say they need to get home, so Sean says goodbye (and gets another hug from both of them), walks back to the library, gets in his car and drives home. Although he’s barely used to thinking of it as home instead of Grandma’s house.

As he gets out of the car, he feels sloshing in his chest cavity. It seems the coffee cup must have spilled on one of those turns, despite the lid.

Oops. Probably should have taken that out. Maybe I’ll take a shower; that seems like fun.

He goes up the porch steps and opens the front door. His mom is sitting on the sofa, doing something on her laptop; she looks up at him in shock.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Sean? What did you get yourself turned into?”

“Well... It’s hard to explain.”

“Give it a try,” she says with a slight smile.

“Okay,” he says, and tells her an abbreviated version of his hangout with Sophia and Meredith.

“So you asked your friend to surprise you? I bet you were surprised. How long was this supposed to last for, again?”

“Forty-eight hours. . . it’ll wear off at school Monday. During lunch, I’m pretty sure, since we met up around noon.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay with that shape for that long?”

“Yeah. I really like it. It’s so nice to be in.”

His mom looks a little more serious. “If there’s anything you want to talk about, like. . . gender stuff? I don’t know a lot about it, but I’ll be happy to listen and help you find someone who knows more about that stuff. Your dad, too, I’m sure.”

“I think I may try experimenting with it with Sophia. What better way to figure it out than to try different bodies?”

“I suppose that’s true. I think I might try talking your dad into trying out some new things, too, although I don’t think we’d want to change gender or anything like that. He’s lying down, by the way; be quiet when you go upstairs.”

“Alright, Mom.”

He starts toward the stairs, but before he’s gone up more than a couple of steps, his mom asks, “What’s that sloshing sound?”

“Oh, I have a compartment in my chest and I put a drink in there to see if it would warm me up. I forgot about it and it spilled on the way home. Looks like my chest cabinet’s watertight, though, ’cause it hasn’t leaked out on my top or skirt.”

She shakes her head. “Go get cleaned up. Did you eat while you – wait. Can you eat in that body?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know where it would go.”

“Well, I’ll be cooking supper about four. If you want something before then, you know where the snacks are.”

He heads on up the stairs and tiptoes quietly down the hall to the bathroom, then starts undressing. He doesn’t have any other clothes to fit this body, but it’s not like he sweats in this form, so probably these clothes will be fine to wear to school on Monday? He hangs them up on the rack on the back of the bathroom door, and turns on the shower.

He finds that he has to turn it way up to what would be scalding in a flesh body to feel much warmth. After standing under the water and just feeling it for a few moments, he pushes up on his middle breast (that still feels weird) and his chest pops open, spilling coffee on the floor of the tub, where it mixes with the shower water, quickly diluting to nothing as it swirls down the drain. He backs up a little and leans back so the shower spray will hit the inside of his chest cabinet directly. It doesn’t feel any different from the warm-feeling (but actually very hot) water on his outer “skin”.

Maybe we could experiment with how I feel things in this body sometime with Sophia.

Out of habit, he reaches for the shampoo, and then remembers that his hair is a wig. Does it even need washing? He’s gotten it wet now, which might be bad for a wig, depending on what it’s made of – he doesn’t know anything about wigs. But his plastic body shouldn’t produce oil or sweat, so it probably doesn’t need shampoo.

He’s got the coffee pretty thoroughly rinsed off, and doesn’t seem to need washing otherwise, so he takes off the wig and sets it on the closed toilet seat just in case prolonged exposure to water is bad for it. Then he stands in the shower for a little longer, just slowly turning in place and feeling the water flow over him. And into him.

He wonders what a shower would feel like in a flesh version of this body.

Or maybe another semi-animate body, but with a different material than this waterproof plastic. Could he be a sponge-person or a cloth-person? Would he have enough structural integrity to stand up and walk like that, or would he just flop around?

After a few minutes, he turns off the water, grabs a towel, and starts drying off.

That certainly was an interesting experience.

He considers for a moment that that's his only outfit and he wants to minimize the risk of getting it messed up before school on Monday. So he takes the clothes off the rack and hangs the wig on the shower rod to dry, then tiptoes down the hall to his bedroom, naked in bare plastic. He gets a couple of empty clothes hangers out of the closet and hangs up his top and skirt for later.

He looks around and thinks for a moment about studying ahead for one of his classes (he got all his homework for the weekend done Friday afternoon) or reading a novel or playing a game, but he feels too wired and excited to sit still. He paces back and forth, rubbing his hands along his plastic skin, pops his chest cabinet open and closes it again. He wonders what his mom and dad would say if he came downstairs for supper without clothes. He's in a paradox where he's naked, but not actually indecent, since he has no vulva or nipples, the minimum that a swimsuit would cover. What if he walked around outdoors like this? Maybe just in the backyard, to start with. . . . Would the modesty equation change, would more people be okay with him walking around naked, if his body were more androgynous, with no breasts either, and narrower hips?

After a while his nervous energy dissipates, and he studies for about an hour and plays a video game until his mom calls out that supper is ready. He doubts he'll be able to eat, but he figures she wants him to sit at the table and socialize with them. He looks at the blouse and skirt, and decides to save them for school; he tries on one of his T-shirts, and it's a little big, but not ridiculously so. A pair of sweatpants works okay once he tightens up the drawstring. He doesn't bother to put shoes on again, as he and his parents often go barefoot at home.

As he comes into the dining room, his dad looks up at him. "Oh, wow. Your mom told me, but I could hardly believe it. Just. . . what she said about if you need somebody to talk to about gender? Yeah, that."

His mom comes into the dining room with a big pot of gumbo. "Sean, could you bring some bowls and spoons in here? Oh, and do you want us to use a different name for you while you're. . . experimenting with gender?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"All right. Just let us know."

He goes into the kitchen and gets a couple of bowls, hesitating over the third one. Then he adds it to the stack, then gets out three soup spoons and heads to the table. "I don't know if I can actually eat in this body, so I'll just have a spoonful or two at first," he says as he sets the bowls and spoons in front of his parents and sits down at his own usual place.

He serves himself a little smidgen of gumbo from the pot, then gets a small spoonful and puts it in his mouth. His mouth is hinged and opens and closes when he talks, but he doesn't think there's any kind of a cavity or hole back there for the food to go into, or any organs to process it if there were. And sure enough, the spoon bumps into the hinge where his lower mouth and jaw connects to the rest of his head.

"Don't think that's going to work," he says. He puts the spoon back in his bowl and gets a napkin to wipe any stray gumbo out of his mouth.

"Are you going to starve, going two days without eating?" his dad asks. "How are you moving around like that, anyway? It looks like you're made of plastic. Is that just an outer covering?"

He doesn't feel hungry. He explains a bit about Sophia's science fair project and how she's been able to venn people into animate dolls, statues, and now a mannequin.

When his usual bedtime rolls around, he's not sleepy. He reads for a while in bed, then turns off the light and tries to sleep anyway, but it's no go. After tossing and turning a while, he gets up and messes around on his laptop, then studies some more and plays another game.

Around dawn, he zones out for a while. He realizes suddenly that he hasn't been paying attention to the game and his character has died an ignominious death. And the clock's half an hour past where he last noticed it. Was that a kind of sleep?

Later on Sunday, about one in the afternoon, his phone buzzes. He forgot to set it back to ring after the cabinet experiment. He checks and sees that he's got a text from Carmen, asking if he's busy or would it be okay for them to call.

He texts back saying go ahead, and the phone rings a moment later.

"Hello."

"Hey, this is Carmen. Meredith told me you're questioning your gender and wanted somebody to talk to about it?"

"Yeah. Something like that, I guess."

"So tell me what you've been thinking and feeling. How'd you start thinking you weren't a boy, or maybe not just a boy?" Carmen asks.

"I don't remember when, but I always felt like I didn't really fit in as a boy."

"Do you have any idea whether you think you're more likely to be a trans girl, or some flavor of non-binary?"

"I'm not sure. It's something I need to experiment with. Like I want to try at least being a girl?"

"Meredith told me you'd vanned into a feminine mannequin. How did that feel?"

"Amazing! I love it. I'm actually a bit scared about how I will feel when I transform back, how it will feel after this. Especially since it would happen in the middle of school. At least Sophia should be there with me, I guess."

"Oof, yeah. I've never had a venn expire on me; I went straight from one tryout form to another, and then renewed the venn on the body I liked best for three years."

"Yeah. Maybe I should ask Sophia about what to do about it."

"Maybe you could meet up to extend the venn for a longer time, this afternoon or tomorrow morning before school? Or maybe try out another fem or androgynous body with a longer expiration, if you'd rather."

"I'd like that. I should do that."

"Yeah, try out different bodies and see how you feel about them. You'll need to file some paperwork with the school if you're going to be going to school in a different body, though. And with the DMV, to get your new face on your driver's license. You probably want to hold off on that last one until you've got a body that you're sure you want to stick with for a while, but if you don't want to go back to your old body, probably pick one that's 'good enough' and file temporary paperwork with the school so you can attend classes and take exams in that body. They're usually understanding about short-term transformations expiring during the day on Monday, but anything that lasts all week they want to have paperwork on file for it."

"Okay. I should probably get in touch with Sophia about this. I loved talking with you about all this."

"I'm glad I could help out. Text me anytime if you want to talk again, and if I'm not in class or at work, I'll probably call you."

Sean says goodbye, hangs up and dials Sophia's number. The line rings four times and Sophia picks up. "Hey, Sean, what's up? Any issues with the body?"

"I'm kind of worried about what will happen when it ends."

"Oh. You mean the timing, during school tomorrow? It'll be during lunch, so you won't get in trouble for disrupting class or anything."

"No, that's not it. I'm scared of how I'm gonna feel when I change back."

“Ohhh, I see. Yeah, I... not Meredith, but another trans person we know who I’m not sure if I should tell you their name... they’ve had some issues with that. Changing into a body that feels nice and then having to change back because of their parents being transphobic. How did your parents take it when you came home like that? Or am I assuming too much – who do you live with?”

“Oh, they were supportive of it. It’s just I’m worried how I’m gonna feel after experiencing this.”

“Yeah, I get it. Kind of. Well, if you want to meet up at the library sometime in the next couple of hours, I could renew the venn for a month? Or venn you into another body you want to try out. I need to be here for supper with my family at five, but any time up to then.”

“Sure. Not sure which of those I want to do, but I trust your judgment on what would be best, Sophia.”

“If your parents are being supportive, do you think you could get them both to come with you and witness the change? You’d need to change back into your old body just for a few minutes – depends on how many people are in line and how long it takes to get back in line and get to the front again. It won’t be as busy today as it was yesterday, though. And you’ll need to go to the school website and print out the form for proving your identity before you come. Otherwise you’ll need to change back before you have an exam in any of your classes.”

“Yeah, I think I can do that.”

“Oh, and bring a bag of clothes to take into the machine with you – they should change to fit your mannequin body.”

Chapter Three

Sean’s mom finds a parking space and he and his parents get out of the car. His dad’s back is bothering him some, although not so bad he has to lie down. Seans feels really grateful he’s willing to come out here and do this for him; Mom too.

There’s no sign of Sophia, so he texts her and she texts right back that she’s on the way. “Let’s get in line,” he says. “Save a place for when Sophia gets here.”

But nobody else has gotten in line behind them by the time she arrives.

“Hey, Sophia. This is my mom and dad.”

“Hey, Sean. Hi, Sean’s parents, I’m Sophia Ramsey.”

“You can call me Heather,” his mom says, and “I’m Kevin,” says his dad.

“So explain what we’re gonna be doing again?” his dad asks.

“Sophia, could you explain, seeing as you’re the expert?”

“Well, the school doesn’t like people coming to school vanned without notice. They’ll let it slide if you do a two-day transformation over the weekend that wears off during school on Monday, since there are rarely exams on Mondays, but if you’re going to be vanned all week or for months on end, they want paperwork proving who you are. So what we’ll do is have Sean turn temporarily back into their old body, and then one of us will take a picture...”

Just as Sophia has finished explaining and Sean’s parents have asked a couple of questions, the doors of the machine open and a couple of women come out. The two catgirls who are the only people in line ahead of them go in, and it doesn’t take them long to come out again as a guy and a girl, both seemingly in their early thirties. And now it’s their turn.

“Alright,” Sean says. “Let’s do it.”

“All you need to do is go in and press the red button,” Sophia says. “I don’t need to go in with you for this part.”

“Okay.”

Sean steps inside the booth and the door closes behind him. There is no green button, no pictures, but only the red button. He hesitates a moment, then presses it. Suddenly he's back to his original body. The feeling of blood pounding in his ears and the sensation of breathing again hits him first, and he gasps as the door opens, just before the dysphoria hits him like a wrecking ball.

"I never knew how much I didn't like this body until I wasn't in it."

"You don't look so hot," Sophia says. "Here, let's get the picture taken and get you into a more comfy body." She turns to his parents. "One of y'all should probably take the pictures, so they'll be on your phones and you can print them out to go with the form."

So his mom snaps a couple of pictures of him while Sophia is setting up the machine for a longer change. He sees three moon icons lined up. "Ready whenever you are," she says, and goes into the left-hand booth.

"Okay."

Once he's in the right-hand booth, the bag of clothes sitting on the floor beside him, Sophia asks, "What exactly do you want this time? The same, but with arm compartments instead of the chest compartment? Or a human girl body, maybe with some interesting extras? Or something androgynous?"

"I don't know. You decide. I trust your judgment."

Sophia hmms, then shakes her head. "I need some input from you. You're gonna have to live with this body for a while – I don't think you want to be making your parents come out here and do all the paperwork and pay a notary fee again too soon. You can try out other bodies on the weekends, and eventually change long-term into another one you like better, but give me some guidance here?"

"I'm torn between human female/androgynous and being a living doll again."

"Well, let's explore that. Do you feel like you would be comfortable going to school in a fem-androgynous human body more or less than in a living doll body? Think about it just in the context of school and see if that helps."

"I want to explore a real body, but I really like the doll body right now. I guess it would be good to stick with what I know I like."

"Okay. Do you want breasts? Bigger or smaller than last time? How many?"

"Maybe only two. I like how they were otherwise."

"Okay, I'll try for about the same size. No guarantee, though. I'm gonna start with the last body from your history, and modify it from there." She taps the screen, then looks around at the other images on her side (presumably) and then starts muttering under her breath and tapping the screen now and then. After a few minutes, she says, "I think this is about right. I think the breasts might be a little smaller than they were before, but not by much, and there should be compartments in both your forearms as well as your chest. Oh, and if I got this right, there'll be a couple of neat Easter eggs for you to find. – While we're at it, could you look for my improved human body in my history? The history's a group of six images in the center, a little distance from all the other ones. The one you're looking for should be clockwise from the version of me with antlers."

Sean finds the image she's talking about and taps it. The big image of her changes to a version without antlers, wearing different clothes. "Ready?" she asks, and he nods. "Let's press our green buttons now." He does, and now he's back in a mannequin body. If the breasts are smaller, it's not enough to easily notice. He's wearing a short-sleeved cold-shoulder aqua top and tight aqua pants, instead of a skirt, and his shoes are aqua to match. There are seams in both forearms that seem to indicate where compartment doors would open.

The doors open, and he and Sophia step out. Four more people have gotten in line while they were inside; his parents are sitting on the nearby bench.

"Huh," his mom says. "You look a little different? Still nice, though. I like how the clothes match your hair."

“They do?”

He puts up a hand to the side of his head and pulls a strand of hair into his field of vision. It’s aqua, the same color as his clothes. And it seems to be longer than last time, though not super long.

“Cool. Sophia mentioned there are a couple Easter eggs to find with my body, so I am excited to see what all there is.”

“Say cheese,” his mom says, holding up her phone. She snaps another picture. “Now we just need to go home and fill out this form. And you can look for those Easter eggs.”

Sophia snickers.

Sean’s dad gives her a sharp look. “You didn’t put in anything that’ll cause trouble, did you?”

“No, just some fun things for her to find later,” she says.

“Eeeee!” Sean squees. “Sorry, that made me happy.”

“No problem,” Sophia says with a grin. “I like helping people.”

“I think we can head home now,” Sean says to his parents, “but can I call or text if I have anything to say or ask you, Sophia?”

“Of course. See you tomorrow at lunch!”

Sean and his parents drive home. In the back seat, he fiddles with his arms, trying to figure out how to open the compartments Sophia told him about.

There’s a seam going all the way around his wrist. About two inches further up his arm, there’s a seam that goes from one side of his forearm arm, a hundred and eighty degrees along the upper surface; on either end it connects to seams that go along either side of his forearm to a point about two inches from the elbow joint, where they meet another hundred and eighty-degree seam. Then there’s another three hundred sixty-degree seam at his elbow.

There’s no obvious button to press or anything.

He thinks very hard about the compartment opening for several minutes. Nothing happens. Then he remembers how his chest compartment opened when he pushed up on his middle breast. Maybe pushing or pulling or turning some body part or other would make the compartments open?

He pushes on the plastic “skin” of the compartment door in several places, but nothing happens. Then he tries pulling on each of the fingers on his left hand, one by one, then tries the same with his left hand pulling on his right fingers. No dice.

He tries twisting or pulling or pushing his right breast in various directions. Nothing happens, but when he pushes his left breast, his chest compartment clicks open – just slightly, because his tight aqua top doesn’t give it room to open very far.

Well, that answers a different question.

He fiddles with his elbow, bending it as far as it will go in each direction, and discovers he can bend it opposite the way a human arm would normally bend with no pain or discomfort. As he bends it backwards, it bumps against his ear, and his arm compartment clicks open.

There’s a small plastic Easter egg inside, covered in swirling intense colors.

“Huh. Literal Easter eggs. Wasn’t expecting that.”

“What’s that about literal Easter eggs?” his dad asks.

Sean reaches forward and hands him the egg.

He laughs. “Don’t distract me when I’m driving,” Sean’s mom says.

His dad hands him back the egg and he examines it more carefully. It doesn't seem to have a seam, and when he taps it, it feels solid, not hollow. But he twists it and taps it in various ways just in case, and nothing happens. By the time he's experimented with the egg for a couple of minutes, they're home.

He texts a photo of the egg to Sophia and asks if there's more to the egg before heading inside.

"Let's get this paperwork out of the way and then you can go do whatever," Sean's mom says as they go in the front door. They all sit down at the dining table and fill out the rest of the form, with his parents signing as witnesses to his transformation. Then he goes up to his bedroom.

Just then, Sophia texts back: "No, just a silly bit of fun. There's more surprises of the non-literal Easter egg type to be found, though."

Sean texts a reply: "That's good to know."

"Or else you've already found them and only texted me when you found the egg."

"No, the egg was the first thing I found."

"Oh, cool."

Sean puts down the phone and looks down at himself. Let's undress and see what this body has to offer.

He starts to take off his top. It snags on the bottom of his cabinet door for a moment, and he has to fiddle with it to get it loose. Then it comes off, and his cabinet door swings further open. It's hard to get a good look, and he wonders if he should have done this in the bathroom where there's a mirror.

He hesitates for a moment before leaving his bedroom topless, but on opening the door, he hears the television from downstairs. Then he walks quickly across the hall to the bathroom.

In the mirror, he can see that the shelves are thicker than they were before. And on the top two shelves, there are a couple of objects – two hands or hand-like things on the top shelf and two feet on the bottom shelf. There seem to be molded receptacles for them in the shelves so they don't slide around when he moves.

He pulls out one of the hands. It's a left hand, but at the end of each finger is a tool of some kind. There's a pencil tip, a pen tip, a greenish-yellow highlighter, a blade (not very sharp), and a key. The right hand is similar, but has different tools on the fingertips: tweezers, a can-opener, a suction cup, a piece of metal that turns out, when he tests it on some paperclips, to be a magnet, and a flashlight.

When he pulls out the feet, he finds that they're a bit smaller than the ones at the ends of his legs, and have colored toenails, aqua to match the clothes and wig.

Ooo!

There's some other stuff which he finds, on pulling it out, to be a bundle of wigs: brown, red, black, blonde, green, and purple. And once he's got all that stuff out of the way, he can see some switches in the back wall of the cabinet. None of them are labeled; there are five of them above the bottom shelf and three more behind the middle shelf.

Only one way to find out.

He starts with the rightmost switch on the bottom row. His left foot clicks and he stumbles, catching himself as it pops off.

He limps over and sits down on the toilet lid, then takes off the pants. Things down there look similar to his previous mannequin body, except for two crucial differences: there's a keyhole in his crotch, and each of his thighs has a set of seams that looks like a compartment lid.

He tries the next switch in order: his left hand falls off. He examines the connections on each end; it looks like it should snap back on pretty simply. But first, he tries to control it without it attached, and finds he can't – nor the detached foot.

He puts on the left hand with all the tools, then gives the fingers an experimental wiggle.

The middle switch turns out to loosen some tiny snaps that are holding his wig in place.

After that, he makes an educated guess that the last two switches on that row will detach his other hand and foot, and decides to test the switches behind the middle shelf.

The leftmost switch alters his vision; the colors go all weird. He wonders if he's seeing a different spectrum or something? Putting his left foot back on, he goes to turn off the bathroom light, and finds he can still see pretty well, though the colors get less intense. Night vision, perhaps. Interesting.

He turns that switch off and turns the bathroom lights on, then tries the middle switch. It causes the bottom shelf of his cabinet to pop up. He stands in front of the mirror again, lifts it and sees that there's a deeper compartment that must go down well into his pelvis.

Then the rightmost switch: it opens up the right leg's compartment. Something seems asymmetrical here.

He feels around inside of the compartment in his pelvis. It seems at first to be empty, but as he gropes around more (it's hard to reach every bit of it, or see it, even with his unusual flexibility), his fingers brush against another switch, and his left leg's compartment opens. Another Easter egg falls out, this one in lighter pastel colors

Seems a bit inconvenient, but a fun secret.

He gropes around some more, but doesn't find any more switches in that compartment. Then he tilts this way and that as he looks into the mirror, trying to get a look at every cranny, but it seems he's found and tried out all the obvious switches.

Sitting down on the toilet seat, he slides the key on the end of his little finger into the keyhole in his crotch. He's pretty sure it's higher than where a human girl's vulva would be, probably to make it easier to reach. Nothing happens until he turns the key.

Then he starts to feel... blissful. It's not overwhelming; he can still focus on his surroundings. It's nothing like a male orgasm and he doubts it's very similar to a female one. But it feels very nice. He wonders if certain drugs might be like this; it feels similar to how he's heard kids at school talk about marijuana.

The blissful feeling continues for several minutes, then gradually fades over the course of a minute or two. As it fades, the key finger pops out of the slot.

That was nice.

He calls Sophia to share what he's found so far.

"Hey, what's up? I can't talk long, we're fixing to eat supper."

He gives her the brief highlights of what he's found and says he'll tell her more during lunch tomorrow. "Is there anything else I haven't found yet?"

"I don't know. I specified the arm and chest compartments, and the extra hands and feet and wigs, but then I also asked it to throw in some more hidden compartments and puzzles and stuff."

"Maybe next Saturday or after school you could come over and help me experiment some?"

"Sure!"

Chapter Four

Monday morning, his routine to get ready for school is simplified in some ways, made more complicated in others. The bag of clothes he brought into the Venn machine were automatically re-tailored for his new body, but they haven't changed otherwise – they're still basic T-shirts and jeans, only cut to fit his breasts and hips and all. Plus he's got two real girly outfits, but the one hanging in the closet, he suspects, is going to disappear or turn into the masc clothes he was wearing Saturday about noon-thirty. So he should probably wear the aqua outfit. That leaves the question of which wig to wear, and what to put in his compartments to take to school with him? Could he dispense with his backpack?

He doesn't have a purse yet, and the aqua capri pants don't have pockets, so he puts his wallet, phone and keys in his left arm compartment, along with some index cards and pencils. He decides to keep his bulkier school things in his backpack, as usual, and puts his extra hands in the backpack too, so he can show them to Sophia without having to go to the restroom, take off his top, and open his chest cabinet. He tries on several of the wigs, but decides to stay with the aqua one that matches these clothes for his debut.

When he arrives at school, he feels a little nervous as people look curiously at him. It's not the awestruck stares he'd have gotten back home, though. These kids are used to classmates coming to school in unusual bodies.

He stops by the office and gives them the proof of identity form. The secretary runs off a few copies and says to give them to each of his teachers.

When he reaches his homeroom, a couple of the girls who sit near him and haven't ever taken any interest in him before introduce themselves.

"I'm Brooke," says a slender white girl with platinum-blond hair and elf ears. "That's a really cool venn."

"I'm Naomi," says a heavier Hispanic girl with four arms.

"I'm still trying to think of a good name," he says.

He looks around and his eye falls on the posters on the wall, spotlights on various historical figures; his homeroom teacher also teaches history, though he's not in any of her classes. "Let's try Isabella."

"It's nice to meet you, Isabella. Who venned you?" Brooke asks.

"Sophia Ramsey."

"Oh, I know her, she's in my Biology class," Naomi says.

"Cool. Yeah, I didn't know anybody since I just moved here, but I asked her since she seemed like she was really good with the Venn machines."

"And this body's even cooler than it looks. Watch this," he says, and pushes his ear, popping open the compartment with his phone, wallet and keys.

"Plus I've got these alternate hands," he says, pulling one of them out of his backpack, "but I can't switch them out without taking off my top and opening up my chest to get at the switches that detach my hands."

"Whoa," Brooke and Naomi chorus. He's attracted some attention from other guys and girls, too.

"Guess all I needed to be popular was to become plastic, it seems," he jokes.

"Plastic is fantastic," Brooke adds.

"True, I love how it feels."

"Want to hang out with us at lunch?" Naomi asks. "We have lunch at fourth period."

"Sorry, my lunch is third period."

"Oh, well. Maybe after school sometime." The bell rings.

"See you around," Naomi says, getting up. They all go on to their first-period classes.

When lunchtime rolls around, he goes over to the table where Sophia, Julianna and Hadley sit. They aren't there, presumably still in line for food.

They come join him one by one, Sophia last of all.

"Have you discovered any more secret compartments or puzzles since we talked yesterday afternoon?" she asks.

"Nope, but I can go into more detail about what I did find?"

The other girls (the other girls! She squeezes internally at the thought) giggle when she tells them about the keyhole in her crotch and the key on her spare hand. When she takes the hand out of her backpack, Julianna jokes, "Put that away, you'll get in trouble for having a dildo at school." Sophia facepalms and Hadley is blushing like a tomato.

Isabella giggles as she puts the hand back.

"There were also these literal Easter eggs," she says, opening the other arm compartment where he put them. He passes them around for everyone to get a good look at.

"Nice," Sophia said. "I don't know how many there are, I just said to hide some in some of the compartments."

"Sophia, I mentioned it yesterday, but do you want to come over after school today?"

"I've got chores and homework to do, and I'll have to check with my parents, but maybe I could come over after that. Have you already made sure it's okay with your parents? I've got work shifts after school on Tuesday through Thursday and all day Saturday, so we'll have to do our next venn experiment Saturday evening after I get off work or Sunday afternoon."

That afternoon, Isabella does the homework assigned that day, then texts Sophia and asks if she's able to come over.

She texts back, "not for long, maybe just for an hour or so, but I should be free soon." Fifteen minutes later, she texts, "on my way." Isabella goes downstairs to wait for her on the porch. It's getting cool, according to the weather app, but she doesn't feel it.

Sophia pulls into the driveway a few minutes later.

"Hey, Sophia."

"Hey, Isabella. Are we gonna do this in your bedroom or what?" A moment after she says that, she blushes and says, "That could be taken the wrong way."

"I mean, I'd like that both ways." Isabella gets nervous and looks away.

Sophia giggles nervously. "Let's just... go on inside."

As they pass through the living room, Isabella's parents look up from the sofa and her mom says, "Hi, Sophia. How long are you staying? We'll be eating supper around seven."

"I've got to be home to eat supper with my family by then, sorry."

Isabella and Sophia go on up the stairs to Isabella's room.

"So... you want to show me what you've discovered so far?" Sophia asks.

"Yeah," Isabella says, starting to get undressed. "Feel free to join me," she says jokingly.

"Uh..." Sophia blushes and looks away. "I guess we're all girls here? Or at least non-boys?" She looks at the closed door. "How likely is it your parents will come in with little notice?"

"Unlikely, I think."

"Sweet!" She grabs the hem of her T-shirt and makes as if to pull it off, then says "Psyke."

"Uh, Sophia, can I admit something before we start?"

"Oh?" she adds, suddenly serious. "Yeah, go ahead."

"I k-kinda have a bit of a crush on you..."

"...Oh," she says, and doesn't meet Isabella's eyes. "I... I'm not sure what to say to that."

"I'm sorry if that was too soon. Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"I've only dated a couple of boys, and haven't ever really thought about dating a girl or an enby, whatever you figure out you are... I think – yeah, it's too soon. Let's think about it again when we've been friends for a while longer, okay?"

"Okay. Yeah."

She laughs nervously. "Feels kind of weird to have this conversation while you're naked."

"I guess just with doing this, I wanted to at least put it out there. Being open in relationships seems to be best."

"Thank you for telling me honestly."

"Of course."

"I'm just not ready to date anyone else right now; it's not that long since I broke up with Ethan... and I need to figure out if I'm attracted to whatever kind of body you wind up with."

"Yeah. I guess I just wanted to let you know, and it's honestly just a crush right now."

"I get it. But go ahead, let's see your insides."

"That definitely has no sexual implications," Isabella says with a nervous laugh. Sophia giggles and looks away for a moment. After a few moments of awkward silence, Isabella says, "One thing I want to try while you're here is having my hands and feet off all at once, since you can help make sure I can get them back on."

"Okay, let's try that after we look at all the compartments you've found so far."

"Okay."

Isabella pushes up her breast and pops open her chest, which currently contains only her extra feet. She takes out the feet and sets them on the floor beside her bed, then sits down and pushes her ears to pop open the arm compartments. Then she reaches inside her chest and uses the switches to pop off her feet and pop open the thigh compartment and the pelvis compartment, and reaches inside the pelvis compartment to find the switch that opens the other thigh compartment.

Sophia looks into the compartments. "Mind if I take a closer look?" she says, taking a small LED flashlight out of her purse.

"Of course. You can probably look better than I could."

She turns on the flashlight and bends over to look close at all the nooks and crannies of Isabella's chest compartment. "Hmm... I think the shelves might detach, to make room to store something bigger? Let's see..." She takes hold of the middle shelf and tugs this way and that, and after a moment it pops free. Then she takes out the other shelves and sets them on the bed beside Isabella. "Cool. Now let's see if we can find anything else in the pelvis compartment..." She shines the flashlight into it this way and that. The top of her head is inches from Isabella's face.

I'd be blushing if I could, Isabella thinks.

"Okay, there's the switch you used to open your thigh compartment... and... hang on, hold still." Sophia sticks her whole head into Isabella's chest compartment along with the hand holding the flashlight. "Aha!" she cries, and presses something down inside, on the front side where Isabella couldn't see either directly or through a mirror.

Isabella's head falls off.

She yelps in surprise. She can't feel anything below her neck, and all she can see is the pillow at the head of her bed.

Sophia says, "What's wrong – oh. Is it okay if I pick up your head?"

"Yeah, you have my permission. Do what you like with my body to experiment. I consent."

Sophia picks Isabella's head up and turns her around to face herself. "That's a pretty broad permission. I'm gonna ask again whenever I do something that seems a bit odd. Like... I think maybe there's a compartment inside your head? Can I fiddle with things to see what makes it open?"

"Go ahead. I'm enjoying this."

Sophia nods, then turns to Isabella's body, which has slumped over on its side toward the foot of the bed, and reaches inside to press the switch that releases the wig snaps. She takes the wig off, then turns Isabella's head all around to look for possible switches or buttons. Isabella's field of view rotates crazily as she does so, but she doesn't feel dizzy – no inner ear to get off balance, no stomach to get nauseated.

"I'm going to try pressing and pulling on your nose," Sophia says, then sets Isabella's head down on the bed and does so. A click sounds from the base of her neck. "There we go." Sophia picks the head up again and tilts it up so the neck is facing her; Isabella's looking up at the ceiling now. Sophia reaches inside and it feels like she's pulling things out, it feels like; then she tilts Isabella's head so she can see. "More wigs! And another Easter egg!"

The new wigs are orange, blue, and mirror-silver.

"It's weird to feel this helpless, but also cool."

The new egg seems to be solid black, but Isabella has a hunch. "Press the night vision switch in my chest, please?" she asks. Sophia does, and the egg suddenly has swirly colors like the others. Sophia's skin is bright red with a tinge of purple at her nose and ears and fingertips.

"Ready for me to put your head back on your body?" she asks.

"You seem concerned?"

"Yeah, it's just... I've never been this physically intimate with anybody, even my boyfriends. And it doesn't exactly feel sexual, but it's pretty close. I'm..." She swallows. "I want to make sure you're completely okay. Every step of the way. And you said you felt helpless..."

"In a good way. I like it."

Sophia smiles. "I'm glad."

"Sophia, you've been so nice to me and I love how creative you can make these simple ideas I have. I guess my crush stems from how well it seems we complement each other."

Sophia grins wide and looks away, failing to hide her blush. She notices the clock and says, "Oh, I've got to go soon. I'd better start putting you back together. We'll have to do the handless and footless thing another time."

"Of course. I may try footless by myself, since I would still have hands."

Sophia sets Isabella's head down on the bed so she can see as she fits the shelves back into her chest cabinet and puts the other feet back in, closes the arm, thigh, and chest doors, then picks up something round before tipping Isabella's head over and snapping the round thing – apparently the head compartment lid – back on. Moments later, her head is back on her body and she can feel her arms, legs and so on.

"I've gotta run," Sophia says. "But after all that trust and intimacy, you deserve something." She gives Isabella a hug.

"Thanks. Also, I guess this means that some time you can try the Mx. Potato head idea again?"

"Yeah, we've only scratched the surface of this. I've got a million more ideas already."

"Yeah. I want to try to have alternate noses and ears and stuff without it looking goofy."

"Bye now!"

Sophia smiles as she leaves.

After she lets herself out, Isabella looks around at the wigs and the new Easter egg.

She sits on the edge of the bed, opens her chest compartment back up and gets out the extra feet so she can reach the switches that detach her feet. They pop off one by one; she raises her legs and looks down at her legless feet. Her arm and finger joints have already proven to be more flexible than a human's, so she tries bending her legs backward at the knees, and brings her stumps close to her face. It works, but she's top-heavy and unbalanced now, and falls over onto the bed.

She can see the mechanisms where the feet would attach and lock on.

She wonders if there are any more secret compartments she could open if she fiddles with those. But there's hardly room for any more, except in her calves?

She pushes the locking mechanism on her right stump this way and that. Nothing happens at first, but as she twists it counterclockwise, her whole leg detaches at the pelvis.

Ooo. This seems fun.

She sets it on the bed beside her and detaches the other leg the same way, wondering if there's a way to detach her arms too. But now would be a bad time to try it, even if she could think of another possible place to look for more switches or buttons.

After significant effort, she manages to put both legs back on, and decides to wait until Saturday to experiment more.

Chapter Five

Friday during homeroom, Naomi asks Isabella if she wants to hang out on the weekend. Isabella tells her she's meeting Sophia to do venn experiments after she gets off work Saturday at four p.m., and she has enough homework to keep her busy most of the day Saturday, but maybe Sunday?

Naomi says Sunday afternoon, after her family has dinner, would suit best. About two p.m. She gives Isabella directions to her house, which is on the north side of town, just outside the business area.

At lunch, Sophia says, "Hey, my car's in the shop. I can walk to the library from work, but if you want to get an early start, you could pick me up when I get off work?"

"Sure, where is it?"

"Just a few blocks west of the library, you can't miss it. Big sign saying 'Metamorphoses'."

Saturday afternoon, after finishing her weekend homework and chores and studying ahead a bit, Isabella makes sure she's packed up all her wigs and extra parts and the Easter eggs in her compartments, plus a bag of old boy clothes to have the Venn machine transform so they fit her new body, and drives to Metamorphoses. There's the big sign Sophia mentioned, and there's a smaller sign near the door that Isabella can just barely read from where she's parked, "Join us for Furry Fridays and Cyber Mondays! Customers in furry or cyborg venns get 10% off."

She's a bit early, so she decides to go inside to wait. The woman at the reception desk and several wait staff she can see from the vestibule are all visibly vanned; the receptionist has green skin, with ivy leaves for hair. One of the waitresses is a robot, with five arms carrying five trays. Another looks like a dragon-girl.

The receptionist says, "You don't look like you're made to take in food, so I'm guessing you're here to apply for a job? Or here with another party that does have a digestive system?"

"I'm waiting for a friend to get off work here. But this seems like a fun place to work."

She glances around before saying, "It's a pretty good place to work as the service industry goes. Do you want an application? You can sit down over there while you fill it out." She gestures to the cushioned benches in the lobby area.

"Maybe I will apply now while I wait, then. Just to have the option."

Isabella takes an application form and sits down to fill it out, now and then looking up and watching the parts of the restaurant she can see from there as the robot waitress delivers the five trays of food to three

different tables and then goes back to the kitchen. Another waitress comes out of the kitchen moments later, a bird-like woman with bright red, green and orange feathers.

When she gets to the question “When can you start work?”, she hesitates. Does she want to start working on weekends right away, or evenings after school? Her grades are decent but not great, and she suspects they’ll take a hit if she loses a lot of her weekend study time to work. And it will make it a hard choice, deciding between using her little remaining free time on study or hanging out with her new friends – the only real friends she’s had since elementary school.

She finally writes, “After final exams,” then checks the school calendar on her phone and writes the exact date.

Not long after she turns in the application, a tall woman with four arms, waving snaky tentacles for hair, and fairly large breasts approaches from part of the restaurant Isabella couldn’t see from where she was sitting. “Hey, Isabella,” she says. “Ready to go?”

“Sophia? I didn’t expect this.”

“Yeah, I guess I forgot to tell you the details. I get vanned into a different body almost every time I come to work. Usually I meet up with some co-workers whose shift is starting or ending around the same time so we can venn each other. Where are you parked? I can tell you more on the way to the library.”

They go out to Isabella’s car and drive the short distance to the library. There’s about six or seven people in line for the Venn machine.

“I think we’ve got time for three trips through the Venn machine before I have to get home,” Sophia says. “Depending on how many more people get in line behind us as the afternoon goes on. So what do you want to try first? Let me surprise you now, and then give you a body you want to stick with on our last trip through?”

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

They overhear the people in front of them, an Asian woman and a white woman, talking about their plans for the evening. They apparently involve the white woman turning into a whole set of musical instruments for the Asian woman to play; they’re discussing the logistics of how they can be shaped and arranged so she can reach them all at once. It sounds like the Asian woman is going to have some extra limbs for the purpose?

“Oooh, that gives me an idea,” Sophia says. It’s a windy day, and Isabella has barely noticed with her relatively tight clothes that don’t flutter around a lot and her insensitivity to temperature differences, but Sophia’s scarf and the tails of her coat are fluttering in the wind.

“While we are waiting, Sophia, why don’t we discuss ideas for my consistent body? I had a few myself.”

“So what are your ideas? I thought about giving you alternate eyes, noses and ears as well as wigs. Maybe boobs of different sizes you can swap out. And I thought about maybe giving you a softer epidermis over the hard plastic? Kind of like upholstery.”

“Epidermis?”

“Uh, skin. Only not really, because this will just be a plastic or cloth covering, not anything biological... although...” She drums her fingers on her thigh.

“I thought of maybe a remote that could have easier access to taking parts off, as well as a failsafe to put myself back together from pieces at any moment,” Isabella says. “Maybe even have options on the remote to change stuff like hard plastic or softer ‘skin’.”

“Yeah, a remote would be nice. Better be careful not to lose it, though, especially not at school. And a failsafe to put yourself back together... Hmm. I’ll have to think of something. Or ask the machine to come up with something.”

“Maybe part of the failsafe or a separate failsafe can bring the remote back to me if I need it?”

“Let’s see what we can do. I’m not sure how that would work, but we can try.”

“Maybe we could try having an object that I can use my mind to bring back to me, alongside whatever else we do to test it?”

“I dunno... vened bodies seem to violate physics in some ways, but I’ve never heard of anybody having telekinesis, even for a specific object.”

A white woman and a black man get in line behind them. “It’ll be great, I promise,” she says. “I tried it with Caitlyn when you were playing poker with your buddies last Friday.”

“I’m not so sure,” he mutters. “The things you talk me into...”

A few minutes later, the women in line ahead of Sophia and Isabella are finished with the machine. The Asian woman, now taller and stronger-looking with six arms, picks up a whole set of musical instruments all built into one apparatus and straps it on her torso like an accordion (which is one of the instruments). She walks off – toward her car, presumably.

“Let’s go!” Sophia says with an excited-looking grin.

“Alrighty!”

“Before I start tinkering here,” Sophia says once they’re both inside, “could you pick out my usual school day form from my history? Then start playing with variations on it. Make sure it looks like I can still hear, see, talk, and move, but anything else goes. Although – you’d probably better stick with organic forms. Making semi-animate forms like yours is tricky, and I haven’t taught you how yet. Remind me to send you some Youtube videos.”

“Okay.”

As Isabella selects Sophia’s usual form from her history, her tall, four-armed, big-breasted body vanishes and is replaced by her usual self, muttering to herself and touching spots on the screen. Variations of her everyday body appear around it, the oddest of which have feathers in place of hair and octopus-like tentacles in place of arms.

“Show me some stranger forms,” Isabella says. The pictures vanish, replaced by new ones, none of which look like they could pass for human. Many of them have extra arms or legs, most of them have fur, scales or feathers, or in one case moss; some are inorganic, such as a long metallic-looking thing with buttons and switches on one end and dull blades on the other. She ignores those and looks for the organic-looking ones. The most interesting are a six-legged creature with a mostly-human head at each end and a dozen tentacles on its back, and a plant-creature similar to the receptionist at Metamorphoses, but less humanoid. She has “wings” consisting of large leaves and no arms to speak of, except for a woody superstructure to support the wings. Looking closer, Isabella can see twiggy fingers coming out of the wingtips. The plant-girl form has no clothes, but she’s covered with moss, so Isabella can’t see anything indecent, if there are even nipples or genitals under the moss.

Isabella touches that image and says, “I’m ready. Should I push my green button or wait for you?”

“Give me another minute,” Sophia says, and more like fifteen seconds later, she touches another spot and says, “Okay, go ahead.”

They both push their green buttons more or less at the same time. As the doors open, Isabella finds her point of view a lot closer to the ground, a bit below Sophia’s waist.

She twists her head to look at her body and finds it swiveling a hundred and eighty degrees like an owl. She’s quadrupedal, and her back, which is sloped up toward her head, has a set of strings stretched across it, and a hollow space like a guitar. But she doesn’t appear to have any arms to play it, and she doesn’t know how to play a guitar anyway.

Sophia steps out of her booth and comes around to Isabella’s. “Come on out, I’ll get the rest of you,” she says.

“Okay. You are gonna have to explain what you did.”

As she steps outside, the wind seems to make the strings vibrate, eliciting eerie sounds. Sophia steps into the booth and picks up some pieces lying on the floor – arms, it looks like, of a similar length to Isabella’s short legs. They were hidden by her guitar-butt, so she hadn’t seen them.

“Oh! You made her an aeolian harp!” the black guy in line behind them says, and starts geeking out about them. Chimes start playing as well as another sharp gust springs up.

“Yeah, I was just reading about them a while ago,” Sophia says. She and the guy, who introduces himself as Marcus, talk about aeolian harps for a minute or two until the people in line behind Marcus and his wife (who introduces herself to Isabella as Taylor) start getting impatient. Meanwhile, Isabella is trying to figure out where the chiming is coming from. Twisting her head a hundred and eighty degrees doesn’t help. Her head isn’t on a long or flexible enough neck to let her look under her “torso”, which is where she suspects the chimes are hanging.

She trots over toward the benches. Marcus and Taylor go into the machine, and Sophia comes over to join her, holding her detached arms, and apologizes. “Sorry for geeking out like that and ignoring you,” she said. “The lady who turned into the musical instruments gave me the idea, that and how windy it is. You want to try switching out your front legs for these arms?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. It should be simpler than the puzzle-box I made out of your last body, but let’s see. . . can you sort of hop up on the bench with your front legs?”

“Let me try. . . ”

Isabella bends her legs and jumps up, not going quite high enough the first time. The next time she catches her legs on the edge of the bench and scoots a little forward.

Sophia sits down beside her, takes hold of one of her legs near where it joins to her torso, and twists. It comes loose, and she snaps an arm on in its place. With the way Isabella’s head is situated, she can’t easily see much of that.

“Hang on, let me adjust your head too, okay?”

“Okay.”

She grasps her head and pulls it firmly toward her. It flips around to where it’s parallel with the length of her torso instead of perpendicular to it. Then Sophia switches the other foreleg for an arm, and she’s more or less humanoid again; she tries standing up and is a little wobbly at first. Now that her head is in a more humanoid position, she can look down and see a double row of wind chimes going down her front, which was her underbelly.

“So what do you think?”

The eerie music of the wind continues, changing tone as Isabella turns this way and that.

“It’s interesting. Not necessarily for me, but it’s definitely interesting.”

“Well, let’s get back in line, then. You want to try out a fleshy human girl body, or more or less human, before you switch back to your modular mannequin puzzle-box body?”

“You decide. I like being surprised. And then when we do my mannequin body, we can potentially try those changes I mentioned.”

There are just two people in line ahead of them when they get back in line, two black teens around their age or a little younger. They’ve barely gotten in line when Marcus and Taylor’s come out. . . having switched sexes.

“This feels weird,” Isabella hears Marcus say as they walk toward their car. “And why’d you have to give me such big tits?”

“You can make mine as large as you want when we switch back,” Taylor promises him. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

The teen boys in front of Sophia and Isabella gawk at them for a moment before setting up the machine for an eight-hour change and going in. Five minutes later, they come out as leopard-people.

Isabella and Sophia set up the machine and go in. “Animate mannequins or dolls, able to hear, see, and talk,” Isabella says quietly, so the machine can hear her but Sophia can’t. She hopes she’s doing this right. A bunch of dolls and mannequins of various sizes appear, but most of them are humanoid. “Various non-humanoid dolls?” They’re replaced by plastic-looking animals and non-humanoid creatures of various sizes. Some of the most interesting:

A creature with a cube-shaped head, a slightly elongated cube for a body, a slinky for a neck and tail and thicker, sturdier slinkies for its legs/arms – about eight or ten, it’s hard to tell with the small picture.

A centauroid creature with black fur all over, and a rattlesnake-like structure at its tail end.

A crablike creature with one pincer-arm and one arm that ends with something more like a human hand.

“Human-like but non-human dolls,” she says, getting a little impatient.

This time she gets a set of humanoid aliens that look like they’d fit in on Star Wars or Babylon 5. They all have a plastic sheen to their skin, except for a few that look more like porcelain, and many have seams at the joints like Isabella’s mannequin body. Some of the more interesting:

A short, stocky humanoid with a long snout and small (relative to the torso size) breasts, wearing a sari or something similar.

A tall, willowy humanoid with six fingers on each hand, and a long prehensile tail with thin tawny fur. She can’t tell what sex they are under their loose robes.

Something fairly close to a human man in overall shape, but with breasts on the sides of his torso, under his arms. He’s wearing shorts and a tube top around his breasts and the middle of his chest.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” Sophia says.

Isabella selects the tall, willowy doll and tells Sophia she’s ready too. They press their green buttons.

She’s flesh again, breathing and feeling her blood pump again. But the dysphoria doesn’t hit her like before. She glances down and finds her breasts are smaller than in her mannequin body, but still definitely there.

“Wow. This is interesting.”

Sophia doesn’t reply. She raises her hand to her mouth and makes a slashing motion. They both leave their booths; it looks like Isabella messed up somehow in giving her the ability to talk. Sophia goes to get her purse out of her locker, and uses her phone to type in the memo app.

“Oops,” Isabella says, abashed.

“Decent job on making an animate doll first try with no coaching, but I can’t talk,” Sophia types. “Can’t hear you super well, either. How about you go in the library restroom and check yourself out. I’ll get back in line by myself and push the red button, then meet you out here when you’re done.”

“Okay. That works for me.”

She shrugs and types “what?”

Isabella gives her a thumbs-up and heads into the library. She enters the restroom and finds an empty stall, where she takes a deep breath before pulling off the silky shirt the machine gave her. Under it she’s wearing a bra, though it looks oddly different from her mom’s bras that she’s seen when doing laundry. She reaches behind herself to try to unfasten it and has to fiddle with it a good deal before it finally pops loose.

Unlike in her mannequin form, her breasts are nicely squishy, and feel really nice as long as she’s gentle with them.

She takes off her shoes (sneaker-like things with no laces) and then starts pulling off her pants.

There's very fine wispy hair on her legs. She hesitates a moment before pulling down her panties as well – her mannequin body didn't come with underwear.

A few minutes later, she meets Sophia outside. She looks similar to her everyday school body, but not as pretty, and her breasts are noticeably smaller. "What do you think?" she asks.

"I'm enjoying the inanimate form the most, to be honest."

"Okay. Let's get in line and I'll change you back to something a lot like the mannequin body from last week, with some improvements."

"Okay."

Chapter Six

It doesn't take long before they're at the head of the line again. "Set me back to my usual everyday body from my history, please," Sophia says, "but don't press the button until I tell you I'm ready."

"So let's review. You wanted a remote control for detaching your body parts, and a way to put yourself back together without outside help if you've lost most of your parts. What else?"

"Maybe a feature on the remote that has a lock on parts coming off so they don't accidentally come off when I don't want them to. Also being able to summon the remote control, or maybe being able to create one in one of my compartments?"

"So it takes more than one keystroke to detach a part, then. Or there's a molly-guard over the whole set of buttons that you have to flip up to reach them."

"Yeah, or like an off switch."

"Okay, let's do this. I have a feeling it's going to be tricky to get exactly what you want, but I'll try."

She says "History" and taps the screen, then starts talking in a low voice. Several minutes later she says, "I'm ready," and she and Isabella push their green buttons.

Isabella is back in mannequin form. It seems overall very similar to her other mannequin form, with similar-sized breasts and roughly the same height, judging from Sophia's height relative to hers. But she feels herself and finds that her skin has a slight give to it, a thin layer of soft material over whatever hard plastic is underneath. The upholstery is thicker over her breasts and butt.

And there's a big box with a handle on it, like a suitcase, sitting next to her.

"Come on, grab your box of spares and let's go," Sophia says.

"Ooo. Fun!"

"You want to swing by my house to look stuff over? It's just a few blocks south."

"Sure."

The two of them go over to Isabella's car and get in. The box isn't as heavy as it looks, or maybe she's stronger than she expects? She hasn't really tested that, though she hasn't accidentally crushed any doorknobs or anything.

Sophia gives her directions, and soon they pull up in front of a one-story house. Isabella gets out and takes the box out of the back seat, then follows Sophia to the front door and through it. "Hey, everybody, I brought my friend Isabella over."

There are four people in the living room, ignoring the muted commercial on TV: a man and woman with blue hair who look like they're in their mid-twenties, a petite animate doll who Isabella supposes is Sophia's duplicate, Bianca, and a dragon-girl she saw waiting tables at Metamorphoses – that must be Sophia's friend Lauren she's mentioned, who's boarding with the Ramseys.

“Hey, Isabella,” they chorus.

“Hey, everyone.”

“Isabella, this is my mom, my dad, Bianca and Lauren.” She points at the man when she says “my mom” and the woman when she says “my dad.”

“Honestly, I shouldn’t even be surprised at this point.”

Sophia’s parents laugh. “Yeah, we switch sexes a few days a month these days,” her mom says.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Lauren says. “Sophia told me a little about you. She said you were meeting up after work to try out a new body?”

“Yep.”

“We’re gonna go to my room and see how well I managed to get the features she wanted,” Sophia says.

“Mind if I come?” Lauren asks. Sophia looks at Isabella.

“Of course! Could Bianca come too? One inanimate to another, I am curious a bit myself about her.”

“Oh, sure. I was planning to just get the memory from Sophia later, but yeah.”

The three of them follow Sophia to her bedroom. It’s a bit smaller than Isabella’s bedroom at home, and crowded with four people. The walls are covered with science posters, and there are a couple of bookshelves overstuffed with books, mostly nonfiction about the sciences, plus a few dinosaur models.

“One thing that would be fun to do after figuring things out is if you played ‘take apart and put back together’ with me,” Isabella says.

“Yeah, that’s one of the first things we’re gonna test,” Sophia says. “Since your ears, nose, and boobs are modular, we can’t use them to open your storage compartments like before. Try wiggling your wrist side to side, like this?”

It takes Isabella a couple of tries, but she manages it, and the storage compartments in her forearms pop open. Inside the left one is a remote control with a transparent shield covering the buttons. She takes it out and examines it. None of the buttons are labeled, but each one is a different color. “One of you should test the buttons first while we figure them out. If I did, I could drop the remote at any moment.”

“Yeah, the machines can’t create anything using language. Even though they’re voice operated. I was trying for diagram or icon labels, but oh well.”

“At least the colors are distinct, and someone can write down which does what.”

“You want to record things while I test the buttons?” Sophia says to Bianca. She nods, flips up the shield over the remote, and takes a photo of the buttons, then copies it to their laptop and brings up an enlarged version in some kind of image editing software.

Sophia presses a red button at the top, and Isabella’s head falls off. Lauren tries to catch her and fumbles; she lands on her side on the carpet, facing the underside of Sophia’s bed. There are boxes under there labeled “books” and “models.”

“Well, I mean in hindsight, it makes sense for that to have been a red button.”

Lauren picks Isabella’s head up again and Sophia props up her body while Lauren snaps her head back on. She notices Bianca adding a text box to the image.

“Well, at least that means I should be able to have some control of my body for the rest. I think.”

“Yeah, that’s hopeful,” Sophia says. “I’m gonna guess the yellow one next to it detaches your wig or one of your facial features.” She presses it and Isabella goes blind.

“Okay, that was disturbing,” she hears Lauren say. “Hang on, one of them rolled under the dresser. . .”

“Eye can’t believe this!” Isabella says.

“There’s a reason for that,” Sophia says. “Oh, here it is. I should probably clean the dust off before we pop them back in. Anyway, you should have spare eyes in different colors and spectra either in one of your compartments or in the carrying case. Bianca, could you open that? We should have checked it first thing. – I’ll be right back, I’m gonna rinse and dry these in the bathroom.”

“There’s no obvious latch,” Bianca reports a few moments later. “I’ll bet the remote opens it. Or maybe a button or switch in one of your compartments?”

“More testing, then, I guess.”

“Yeah. Do you mind if we do another test while Sophia is washing your eyeballs?” Bianca asks.

“Sure.”

“You should probably lie down on the bed so things won’t fall on the floor as much,” Lauren adds. She helps Isabella get situated.

“Thanks.”

“The next button on the top row is white,” Bianca says. Isabella hears a click. “Hair. Or wig, I guess. Hang on while I add that to the diagram.” Isabella hears typing, then footsteps.

“Here you go,” Sophia says, and Isabella feels pressure where her left eye should be, and can see again. Sophia pops the other one in, and now she’s got depth perception.

“That was weird.”

“Do you want to leave your wig off until we find the spares?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The next row of buttons removes her nose and ears. She doesn’t go completely deaf without them, but can’t hear nearly as well until Lauren snaps them back on.

“If I’m guessing right about what’s next, you should take off your top,” Sophia says. “Do you want some of us to leave the room for that?”

“No, you can stay. It’s honestly kinda fun.”

Isabella sits up and takes off her blouse. As before, her breasts don’t have nipples. “The next row is probably going to be boobs and arms,” Sophia says; she presses a button and indeed, Isabella’s left breast falls into her lap. Under it hard plastic is exposed, with a couple of attachment points.

“Want to put that right back on?” Sophia asks.

“Maybe wait just for fun. I wanna let the non-essentials slowly fall off.”

The next button pops off her right breast, and the one after that pops open her chest cabinet. Lauren and Sophia lean in to look inside while Bianca adds notes to the diagram.

“What do you see this time?” Isabella asks. There’s a mirror on Sophia’s closet door, but she can’t see her reflection well with Sophia and Lauren in the way.

“Looks like spare hands and feet, like before, but also several pairs of eyeballs and ears and a few noses,” Sophia reports. “I don’t see any buttons or switches.”

“That makes sense.”

Sophia takes out a few noses and holds them up: a cute button nose, a larger aquiline nose, a long Pinocchio nose. “Want to try one on or keep trying buttons?”

“Let’s keep trying buttons.”

The next two buttons detach Isabella’s hands, and the next two, her arms.

“Oh, you’ve disarmed me!” Isabella jokes.

“Never have a battle of bits with an unarmed woman,” Bianca rejoins.

“I think you’ll need your shoes and pants off for the next tests,” Sophia says. “You want us to help you or put your arms back on and let you do it?”

“You guys do it. I am a mannequin, after all.”

“Okay, lie back and lift up your legs.” Sophia and Lauren pull her shoes off, then work her pants out from under her butt and pull them off. “You can lower your legs now.”

“Is that a keyhole?” Lauren asks.

“Yeah,” Sophia says. “Next I’m guessing will be your feet,” she says to Isabella. “Or maybe your thigh compartments.” But instead, there’s a click from Isabella’s butt.

“Wonder what that did?”

“Stand up,” Sophia suggests. Isabella tries to, but with no arms she’s wobbly. Sophia and Lauren catch her by the shoulders.

“Huh. Instead of a secret compartment under your chest cabinet, it opens from behind. Double doors – each butt cheek is a door. And your butt looks more anatomically correct than last time, at least with the doors closed.”

“Anything in there?”

“Lauren, could you hold her steady while I open the doors...? Thanks.” Isabella can feel Sophia pulling her butt cheeks wider apart. “Huh, that’s weird.”

“What is it?”

Sophia takes her phone and snaps a photo, then shows it to Isabella. On the left there’s a set of pegs that several keys are hanging on, each with a different-colored haft. On the right, a long faucet sticks out – well beyond where her butt would be if the doors were closed.

“The faucet swivels out when I open the doors, and swivels in as I close them,” she says.

“What does it do?”

“I have an idea. Could you open your mouth wide?” She gets her key ring out of her purse and turns on the flashlight.

Isabella opens her mouth and Sophia shines the light in. “Okay, yeah, you’ve got a hole in the back. I’m betting there’s a pipe that runs down to a tank in your pelvis. Do you want to test it or would that be too gross?”

“I think I have a good idea of the purpose. The keys are interesting, though. Let’s keep figuring out the remote first, in case there are more surprises.”

“There’s just nine buttons left,” Sophia says, snapping her butt shut. “You want to lie down again?”

Isabella lies down. The next two buttons open her thigh compartments, which each contain a wig – a green pixie cut and an orange afro. The next two open calf compartments, which are empty. The next two after that pop off her feet, and the penultimate two remove her legs at the hip.

“One button left,” Sophia announces. “Hypotheses?”

“No clue,” Isabella says. “I mean, there is one idea, but I am a bit embarrassed to say...”

“My guess is it’ll open the carrying case,” Bianca suggests.

“Great minds think alike,” Sophia says with a grin. “Lauren?”

Lauren taps the side of her snout. “Either that, or there’s another compartment to open. Maybe in the back of her head? But that wouldn’t fit the top to bottom pattern, so... either that or it just reveals a keyhole on the carrying case that one of those keys opens.”

Sophia pushes the last button, a black one. The case snaps open.

“Before we open it up, do you want us to prop you up so you can see? Or put your legs back on?”

“You can prop me up. I wanna be your blank slate to play with.”

Sophia and Lauren pick her up and lean her against the corner formed by the wall and the bedstead. Then they heft the carrying case onto the bed beside her and open it.

It unfolds to reveal multilevel shelves with molding that hold additional wigs, hands, feet, breasts, and even ears – a couple of large pairs like a basset hound’s or a rabbit’s that maybe wouldn’t fit in her chest cabinet with everything else in there. There are also extra buttocks, it looks like, as she examines what she thinks at first glance are more breasts, but have hinges on the sides.

It looks like each hand has a different set of tools built in. Some of the feet seem to have shoes built in, one pair with red high heels and one with something like ballet flats, and two more pairs with ice skates and suction cups in the soles.

“Ooo, interesting,” Isabella squees.

“Plus there’s a pair of rollerblade feet in your chest,” Sophia adds.

“I want!” Bianca pipes up. She takes a photo of the contents of the chest, then goes back to the computer.

“Yeah, we’ll have to work these upgrades into your next body,” Sophia says.

The butts and breasts are mostly just different sizes, but one pair of breasts, about the same size as the ones that were popped off earlier, have nipples, and appear to have a valve in the side.

“I think we should experiment with those,” Isabella says, nodding at the breasts Sophia is examining since she can’t point any other way.

“Excuse me,” Lauren says. “Got to visit the little dragons’ room.” She hurries out, and Sophia and Bianca laugh.

“I think that was finally too much for her,” Bianca says. “You want me to go heat up some milk, or will water be okay?” Sophia blushes.

“What do you mean, too much?” Isabella asks.

“It looked like she was embarrassed,” Sophia says. “It’s not as obvious on her as it is on a human with light skin, but I’ve gotten to know her dragon-form body language over time.”

“If our hypothesis is correct,” Bianca says, “we’ll fill up these boobs with this syringe,” she rummages in the bottom of the case and comes up with what looks like a two or three ounce syringe with a screw end, “and then they’ll simulate lactation.”

“Oh. Well, only one way to find out.”

“I’ll go heat up the milk.” Bianca walks out, chortling.

“Having fun, Sophia?” Isabella asks.

“I don’t know if... this might be too much just yet?” Sophia says, looking down at the carpet.

“Too much what?”

“Intimacy,” she whispers. “Do you seriously want me to... nurse from you?”

“What. I mean... I didn’t think that far ahead, honestly. I just wanted to see how they worked. But if you want to?”

“Maybe at some point... but not yet. It’s too much, too soon.”

“That’s okay. I wasn’t even thinking that far myself, honestly.”

“The milk doesn’t need to go to waste, though. We can test your ability to drink.”

“Of course. And then after that we have some keys to try.”

“You’ll probably want at least your arms back on for that – what?” Sophia blushes even redder. “No! I can get the keys out for you and put them somewhere you can reach more easily, but please don’t ask me to put the keys in you!”

“Sorry. I’m bad at the whole social interaction thing, honestly. I seem to always say the wrong thing.”

“Yeah, I’m not much better, but... I’m not saying never, just not now. Not yet.”

“Yeah. Sorry, Sophia. I never intended to suggest that stuff now, honestly. I just saw this as playful fun.”

Bianca returns with a coffee mug. “Ready to nurse my sister?” she says with a cackle.

“We will not be doing that,” Sophia says firmly. “Do you want your arms back on to hold the mug, or should I just pour it down your throat?”

“I like being helpless like this. It’s fun feeling like just an object.”

“All right, tilt your head back and open wide.”

Sophia pours in a little of the milk and then looks into Isabella’s mouth. “Yeah, it’s drained down the back. But there’s some residue. You’ll probably want to chase it with water to clean your mouth.” Isabella couldn’t taste it, but it felt pleasantly warm going down. Sophia pours in the rest, and she can feel it low down, still radiating heat.

“... and now you’ll need to go to the bathroom so we can take out the keys to put them in an arm or calf compartment. I don’t think we can open your butt without releasing the spigot.”

“That’s a good point. Let me go do that.”

Sophia snaps her legs on again, and says “Any preference on which feet?”

“Show me the shoe-like ones; I’m thinking of trying the high heels.”

Sophia takes out each of the feet with attached shoes. One pair are black flats, another red high heels, another half boots with low heels.

“Oh, this is hard. The heels or the boots? Sophia, you decide for me. I trust you.”

Sophia snaps on the boots, then Isabella’s arms and regular hands, and gives her the remote. “Orange button on the fourth row opens your butt,” Bianca says, looking at the annotated photo.

“Thanks,” Isabella says as she stands up and starts toward the door.

“You want to get dressed?” Sophia asks.

“I mean, I don’t really need to. Nothing to hide and all.”

“’Cept your keyhole,” Bianca giggles.

Sophia glares at her.

“You’d think, being the same person, you two would get along better.”

“Yeah, you’d think.” Sophia stares down Bianca. “You know you’ll remember all this embarrassment when we merge.”

Chapter Seven

Isabella hears them continuing to tease each other as she leaves the room. She looks down the hall of closed doors and wonders which one is the bathroom. As she wonders whether to go back and ask, her problem is resolved by the sound of a flushing toilet and then a sink running behind the next door on her left. She stands outside and waits; Sophia’s dad comes out a minute later. She stares at Isabella’s naked, boobless, noseless form for a moment.

“Nope,” she says, throwing up her hands and walking past her. “Sophia’s eighteen and you can’t get her pregnant anyway. Not gonna even ask.”

Isabella goes into the restroom. The seat’s down, of course. She sits down and looks at the remote. Sophia said the orange button on the fourth row, right? She presses it and feels her butt pop open. She sets the remote down beside the sink and reaches back to pull her cheeks farther open. Then she hears a spattering a bit like pee. She waits a few moments after it stops, then closes her butt and flushes.

She doesn’t think she needs to wash her hands, but does it anyway just to be safe.

She returns toward Sophia’s bedroom. Just as she reaches it, Lauren steps out of a door near the end of the hall.

“Is it safe to come back?” she asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you done with the...” She gestures as if cupping her breasts, and Isabella wonders why a reptile would have breasts. “...mammalian stuff?”

“I dunno, I’m not a mammal. I just wanted to see what everything in the box did. I didn’t think about the sexual implications.”

“Okay, cool.”

“Though now that I think about it, Sophia was the one to vinn me into this, so... I dunno.”

“It sounds like you’ve got more stuff than she deliberately put in.”

“Yeah, but that begs the question, which parts were deliberately put in?” Lauren follows Isabella into Sophia’s room.

“Hey, did everything come out okay?” Bianca says, and giggles. Sophia buries her head in her hands.

“Sophia, can I ask you something?” Isabella asks.

“Sure.”

“Did you put those lactating breasts in the transformation yourself?”

“No! I did tell it to give us several options for each detachable part, but that’s it. I didn’t specify all the eye colors or boob sizes, much less that.”

“Okay. I just wanted to ask. Cause I know I certainly wouldn’t have thought of that. But I trust you. Shall we get those keys out?”

Sophia smiles and blushes again, more softly this time. “Okay. Just turn around and press the orange button.”

“Orange button, got it.”

Her butt pops open and Sophia rummages around. “Uh... did you wipe your spigot? It’s got some droplets of milk on it still.”

“Just when I thought it was safe to come back,” Lauren whimpers.

“What’s one more to a polycule like yours?” Bianca teases.

“Polycule?” Isabella asks.

“No big deal,” Sophia says. She hands Isabella a box of tissues and a handful of keys. “Better put those in your arm or calf.”

“A polycule is like a couple, but for romantic sets of three or more people,” Lauren explains.

“I knew that. I was more so surprised you were in one. Good for you. Though I guess if I ever dated Sophia, we’d technically be a polycule,” Isabella says, winking at Bianca.

“Yeah,” Lauren continues, “there’s me and my two girlfriends, and me and one of my girlfriends have plushie duplicates, and there’s my snuggle-friend, my girlfriend’s roommate.”

“I’m gonna need a flowchart to remember all that.”

“Oh, do you want to meet my girlfriend’s plushie self? She’s in my room reading.”

“Sure.”

“Be right back.” Lauren steps out.

“Well, while we’re waiting, I actually wanted to talk to Bianca at some point,” Isabella says. “About her doll body.”

“Sure,” Bianca says. “Mine’s pretty basic compared to yours. The cobbler’s children are barefoot.” She makes what Isabella thinks might be an attempt at puppy dog eyes at Sophia, but her hard plastic face isn’t flexible enough to pull it off.

“I’ll have Lauren or Julianna upgrade your body next time we split and merge,” Sophia says.

“Maybe someday we could try each other’s bodies. Looking like ourselves, but with features from the other one.”

“Oh, yeah, that would be an easy way to get all the same features,” Bianca says.

Lauren returns, with a blue plushie triceratops nesting in her arms. “Isabella, this is Desiree.”

“Hi, Desiree.”

“Hi, Isabella!” she says in an adorable high-pitched voice, like a toddler. “You’re Sophia’s friend from high school, right?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“I know that Sophia is supposed to be the idea person, but your plushie thing gave me an idea. What if there was like a space in my head where a little person could be in and talk to me and be like my conscience, like Pinnocchio?”

Sophia looks thoughtful. “We didn’t check if this body’s head has a storage compartment like the last one. I kind of doubt it with all the mechanisms for attaching and detaching the ears, eyes and nose. But yeah, that could work. Next time Bianca and I split, we could make her tiny and let her ride in your head or chest for a bit. Desiree, would you want to try it out now?”

“Yay!” Desiree cheers. Isabella looks at the diagram on the computer screen and pushes the button to open her chest cabinet.

“Maybe I could walk around and give her a bit of a ride?”

“I’m not sure if I’m gonna fit with all that stuff in there?” Desiree says. “But you can try to squeeze me in.”

“Let’s take out the hands and feet,” Sophia suggests.

“Good idea.”

Isabella and Sophia empty out the bulkier items, and Lauren gently sets Desiree inside. “Ready to close it up?”

“Aunt Sophia, can I have a night light?” Desiree squeaks. Sophia smiles and puts her little LED flashlight in, then closes the door.

“Bianca, would you like to tag along as my conscience on this walk?” Isabella says with a smile and a wink.

“I’d love to,” Bianca says.

“We’ll be back in a little. I wanna give Desiree a fun time.”

Sophia nods and takes Bianca’s place at the computer, opening up a word processor document.

"We're going for a walk," Bianca tells her parents as they pass through the living room.

"Dress warm," her mother teases as they walk out the front door.

It's after dark, but the sky is clear and there's a quarter moon. Bianca leads Isabella down the block, toward the library.

"So, Bianca... I was hoping to talk with you about Sophia, or yourself I guess."

"Sure," she says.

"So I'm sure you've picked up on me and Sophia?"

"It was pretty obvious by the time she said that about the keys, yeah."

"I wanted to talk, as you both are her but also aren't dealing with the emotions she is, and so would be able to share your perspective. I'd say a third party, but this would probably be more of a two and half'th party. Is that okay? It's not like we are talking behind Sophia's back, she will find out eventually. I just wanna hear what you think to try and gauge things."

"Yeah, no later than next Friday – we'll merge Thursday night or Friday morning so she gets the benefit of my studying for a couple of exams. And as for you and Sophia..." She pauses, seemingly gathering her thoughts. "Our last boyfriend hurt us. Not physically, I mean emotionally. He got all puritanical about what we vanned into, especially when we started experimenting a lot with animate doll bodies. And we rashly swore off dating again until college. But... technically we didn't swear off dating girls, just boys. And I think you might be good for us."

"Yeah. I didn't know."

"And I don't know you super well yet, but I know you're into wonderfully weird vanning, and that's one of our main interests. Are you interested in science, too?"

"Yeah. It's why I found you in the first place. I don't know what I want, but I am content to be Sophia's little lab rat."

"Awesome! I just need to know how you feel about hot dogs. Sandwich or not?"

"I plead the fifth; not only can I not decide, but I feel like there is a right and wrong answer."

"Huh. Care to elaborate?"

"Well, whatever you think is clearly the right answer in this situation."

"Hmm. Weasely, but I'll tentatively allow it! You have my blessing to court my sister!"

"Does that mean I can court you?" Isabella says, half seriously. She can feel high-pitched giggles inside her chest.

"Stop your ears, little one, these are affairs of grownups," Bianca stage-whispers. "And yeah, that would be cool. Do you want to hold hands?"

"Yeah. Can I kiss you? I don't know how it will work, but..."

"I don't think either of us are made with flexible lips, but we can bump snoots if you like." More giggles from inside Isabella's chest.

"Okay, then."

Bianca stops walking and turns to face Isabella. Their faces approach, and Bianca's nose bumps Isabella's flat face, reminding her that she never put her nose back on; her hard immovable mouth crushes into the thin layer of cushioning on Isabella's face above her hinged jaw. It's awkward and ridiculous, but it feels nice – not physically, but emotionally, like they're making a connection.

"We should head back. I think the two of us should talk with Sophia about it."

“Yeah.” They turn around and walk back to the house. When they get there, Sophia and Lauren are setting the table for supper.

“We’re back,” Bianca says.

“Hey. You want to sit and talk while we eat?” Sophia’s mom asks. “And maybe put some clothes on?”

“Sure. Can Bianca and I talk with Sophia for a moment first?”

“Sure, just a minute.” Sophia finishes setting out silverware and walks back to her bedroom with you.

“You want to put on some boobs along with those clothes?” she asks as she sits down on the bed.

“Yeah, toss me a pair. And a nose while you’re at it. Bianca, do you wanna start?”

She gets out one of the larger pairs of breasts from the box and literally tosses them at Isabella, waiting for her to catch them and put them on before she tosses her a cute little button nose.

“Quite the contrast,” Isabella murmurs.

“So we’re dating now,” Bianca says, and Sophia chokes on nothing. “Wh-a-at?” she splutters.

“That’s not exactly how I was intending to do this, but I guess that works,” Isabella says, facepalming.

“Yeah, we can decide if she’s dating you too after we merge, but we talked about how great she is and kissed and held hands.”

“Attempted to kiss, that is.”

“Yeah, maybe it doesn’t count if neither of us have lips. Or a tongue. But we bumped snoots. It was silly and fun.”

“Bianca told me about your ex,” Isabella says. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry if I hurt you at all.”

Sophia continues to stare at her. “Okay... um... that’s sooner than I was intending to tell you that, but... sure. Let’s do this. Bianca knows I want to. And no, you didn’t hurt me, it’s just... fuck it, let’s kiss.”

Inside Isabella, a silly triceratops cheers.

“Without the audience,” Sophia amends before Isabella’s mouth and her lips meet.

“Awww,” Desiree pouts as Isabella pops open her chest and pulls her out.

“Sorry for using the walk as an excuse to deal with my love life, Desiree.”

“Scoot,” Sophia commands her. “And don’t tell Lauren. We’ll tell her ourselves.”

“My nonexistent lips are sealed!” she proclaims, and trots off to the door with her stubby little legs. “Um. Doorknob, please?” Bianca lets her out.

Sophia looks back at Isabella. “Sorry. She kind of ruined the mood. Let’s go join them for supper, and we can have a goodnight kiss before you go?”

“I wanted to ask Bianca because, while yeah, you were feeling nervous, Bianca was able to be an outside observer. She could see how happy it made you. I was only half-joking when I asked her to come as my conscience.”

“Yeah,” Sophia says with a radiant smile. “It does.” Then she looks at Isabella’s open cabinet. “Oh, excuse me,” and retrieves Desiree’s ‘night light.’

“Maybe we could add a changeable mouth next time, to have one made for kissing.”

“You’d better put some clothes on too,” Sophia adds. “You’ve already scandalized my folks enough.” She giggles.

Isabella puts back on the blouse and pants her body came with – the blouse is a pretty tight fit over the larger breasts, but she manages to get it on all the way – and all three of them head back to the dining room. Desiree, with her tiny legs, has only made it halfway there by the time they catch up with her.

They all sit down at the dining table. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey bring in a big bowl of chili and a bowl of rice, and Sophia and Lauren serve their plates with a bed of rice and then a big scoop of chili over it. Sophia's parents sit down and serve themselves next.

Bianca makes a questioning gesture. Sophia hesitates, then nods. "Isabella and I are dating now, Mom and Dad," she says.

It's a strange sensation, feeling so embarrassed but without the hot feeling in one's face that comes with blushing in a flesh body.

"Congratulations," Sophia's mom says.

"So tell us more about yourself," her dad says.

"Well, I grew up in Chicago, but we came here to visit my grandma once or twice most years, and when she died and my mom inherited her house, my parents decided to move here. They wanted to let me finish high school in Chicago, but our house in Chicago had a plumbing leak and they decided to go ahead and move right away, in the middle of the semester, instead of living in a hotel for weeks while it got fixed."

"Are you planning to go to college?" her dad asks.

"I don't know."

"I've gotten accepted to UNC Chapel Hill," Sophia says. "Same place Meredith is going, but not just because she's there. It's got the best genetics program in the south."

"I'm going to East Carolina," Lauren says. "Probably in the fall, but maybe next year. I'm still not sure about the finances."

"Honestly," Isabella says, "I don't really know what I want to do with my life. If I'm being honest, hanging with Sophia is some of the most I've felt a purpose or something. I dunno."

"You could help me with my venn research," Sophia says. "I'm planning to keep it going as a side project while I'm in undergrad and grad school, as much as I have time for it, although it'll depend on whether I have professors that are supportive of Venn machine research."

"You could venn into a smol body like mine and stow away with her," Desiree pipes up.

"I'd love that. I could be a tiny doll version of myself."

"It's fun," Sophia's mom agrees, giving her husband bedroom eyes. She blushes and looks down at her plate.

"TMI, Mom!" Sophia says, her face like a stop light.

Isabella laughs.

"What did I say?" Sophia's mom asks with an exaggerated look of innocence.

Isabella takes pity on Sophia's embarrassment and tries to change the subject. "So Lauren, I know we have been hanging out today, but we haven't really gotten to know each other."

"Well... I've been a friend of Meredith and Sophia for a long time. We used to go to church together. Then I ran away when my parents found out I was trans, and I laid low until I turned eighteen, and then came back to town and asked the Ramseys if I could stay with them for a while. And I'm still here. I'm sort of reconciled with my parents, they're decent to me these days, but I don't feel comfortable moving in with them again."

"Well, I'm glad you were able to be who you are."

Lauren gives a toothy grin. "Yeah, so am I." Desiree snuggles into her scaly arm.

“Could Sophia and I try one last thing from my venn after dinner before I head out?”

“Sure,” Sophia’s mom says. “And when you get home, let your parents know we’d like to welcome them to Brocksboro.”

“Of course.”

“Maybe it’ll suit to invite you all over for supper next weekend or the weekend after,” her dad adds.

“That sounds nice.”

Conversation turns to other topics for a while as the people with meat bodies continue eating. When they’re done, Sophia’s mom says, “Remember it’s your turn to wash dishes, Sophia.”

“I’ll swap with you,” Lauren says. “You can do my dishes on Monday night.”

“Thanks!” Sophia and Bianca get up and Isabella follows them to their bedroom.

“So, uh... How steamy do we want this to get?” Isabella jokes nervously.

“Uh... if you mean the keys?” Sophia says, not meeting her eyes. “Not on the first date, please. But we could kiss?”

“Okay. Can we have a compromise? I have an idea that sounds fun. No keys, though.”

“Okay?” Sophia says cautiously.

“Let me see the remote,” Isabella says, picking it up. She sits down on the bed before pressing the buttons to pop off her legs, then her arms, taking care to release the arm holding the remote last.

“Oh... you want me to kiss you while you’re helpless?”

“Yes! I’d love that.”

Isabella’s unsupported torso has fallen over backwards, lying crossways across the bed. Sophia sits down beside her and leans in for a kiss. Her nose bumps into Isabella’s much harder nose. “Ow.”

She grabs the remote and detaches her nose, then tries again. “Much better,” she murmurs.

Bianca sits down on Isabella’s other side and puts a gentle hand on her breast. “Is this okay?”

“It’s perfect.”

She squeezes a little less gently, and puts her other hand on Sophia’s breast. Sophia gasps. Isabella’s new soft plastic skin isn’t as sensitive as Sophia seems to be, but it’s a lot more sensitive than her previous hard plastic body.

“Would that be considered masturbating?” she jokes.

It’s hard to tell with her helpless supine vantage point, but Bianca does something outside Isabella’s field of vision, and Sophia collapses onto her. “Oof,” she says. “Even with your new padding, you’re too hard for that to feel great, sorry. And, uh... yeah. It’s not the first time we’ve... that Bianca has helped me out like that.” She sits up. “I think we’d better save that for later.”

“Okay.”

She kisses Isabella again, and then says, “Let’s get your arms and legs back on. Oh, and your nose. And shoes...”

“And I’ll print out the diagram of your remote,” Bianca says.

“Wait, let me try something.” She wants to test out the automatic failsafe that should reform her in an emergency. But on further thought, none of the buttons on the remote seemed to do that, and they didn’t find any buttons or switches in or on her body. Maybe it just takes a mental effort?

“I think it’s getting a bit late for that,” Sophia says with a look of regret. “Let’s test whatever it is next time.” She snaps on Isabella’s arms and legs and hands her the shoes.

Bianca messes with the computer for a minute, then goes down the hall and comes back with a black and white printout of the annotated photo. “Sorry, we’re out of color ink, but you should be able to tell which is which by the layout,” she apologizes.

“Thanks.”

It is getting late. Later than Isabella told her parents she’d be out. She gets up and gives Sophia another kiss, then starts packing up the box of goodies, and stows her remote away in her arm compartment.

“See ya later, Sophia. Bye, Bianca.”

“Bye!” Sophia follows her to the car and gives her another goodnight kiss.

Chapter Eight

When Isabella gets home, her mom says, “How’d your visit with Sophia go?”

“It was great. It’s nice to have such a great girlfriend,” she says casually.

“Oh! That’s wonderful. She seems like a nice girl. You should invite her for supper sometime. Let’s see how your father’s back is feeling next weekend.”

“Sophia’s parents said to tell you they’d like to have us all over for supper.”

“Oh, that was nice of them. But it depends on your father’s health, you know.”

“Yeah. Only – what if Dad used the Venn machine to fix his back problems?”

“That’s an idea,” her mom says. “I’ll need to do some reading about those things.”

“Yeah. I’m sure Sophia could help.”

“Let’s talk about it with your father tomorrow,” she suggests. “Good night.”

Isabella goes up to her bedroom and undresses, hanging up her clothes. She wiggles her wrist and pops open her arm compartment, looking at the keys. Each has a different color haft: yellow, cyan, magenta and black.

Well, only one way to find out how these work.

She sits down on the bed, inserts the yellow key into her keyhole and turns it.

As the key turns, she suddenly feels like she’s falling. She grabs hold of the bedstead, but realizes a moment later that she’s still in bed, not moving; it just feels like she’s falling.

She carefully stands up with the key still in position. The clash between what her eyes are telling her and what she feels is disorienting, but her actual balance isn’t affected; her eyes tell her she’s standing still, but she feels like she’s going to crash into the floor and probably break through into the kitchen, she’s going so fast.

This is bizarre!

She lies back down and waits to see what happens; the last key’s effect ended on its own after a few minutes. After five more minutes, she feels like she’s slowing down. A minute or so later, she comes to a stop. Except she hasn’t gone anywhere.

She takes out the yellow key and inserts the cyan one. As she turns it, a blissful feeling gradually comes over her. It’s similar to the feeling she got from the finger key in her previous body, though not quite the same.

She feels so nice that she forgets to check the time, but after a while, it fades.

She takes out the cyan key and inserts the magenta one. When she turns it, she doesn’t feel different at first, but as she looks around, things she’s seen every day since she moved in and unpacked, or much longer, things she’s had since she was a child, seem new and different, heavy with more layers of meaning than she ever realized.

She stands up and paces around the room, examining things more closely.

This little green toy soldier, the only one left from a hundred-piece army set she got for Christmas when she was six, speaks silently but eloquently about the horrors of war. She nods silently in agreement.

Her roving glance lands on a copy of Hamlet that she read in sophomore English Lit. Deeper meanings beyond anything she perceived at the time or Ms. Grant taught her about flood her mind and wash away again as she grasps for scraps she can hold onto.

She picks up her phone and pauses in awe of the incredible power she holds in her hand. She is richer than Solomon or Croesus could dream, richer than Carnegie or Rockefeller. She resolves to use this power responsibly.

After a few moments of reflection, she unlocks her phone and clicks the gallery icon. The most recent photo is one that Hadley took of Sophia, Julianna, and Isabella.

Isabella is suffused with awe that such a beautiful and brilliant girl is willing to call her her girlfriend. She's given her an amazing body, but more, she's given herself. Isabella doesn't feel worthy of these gifts, but she resolves to make herself so.

Her eye falls on another photo, a picture of her dad opening one of his presents from her last Christmas. She wonders at how much he's seen and done, and how hard his life has been since his injury. She wants to go right now and talk him into going to the Venn machine with her. He mustn't suffer another minute! But as the effect of the key fades, she realizes that he is hopefully asleep, and if so, he needs it. Tomorrow will be soon enough to venn him into a body without back pain.

After she removes the key, she takes some notes about what she thought and felt before trying the black key. Then she texts Sophia a brief, heartfelt note about how much she means to her.

The black key is the only one left. The moment she turns it, she feels super energetic. She wants to run a mile, climb a tree, dance the jitterbug, do somersaults. She paces around, looking at her door and window and hesitating whether to jump out – her plastic body can take the impact – or run down the stairs and outside. Can this body even get tired?

But she remembers her sleeping father. She puts on her headphones, but doesn't start any music just yet; she tiptoes downstairs and out into the back yard, then starts playing fast music and dancing until the black key's effects wear off.

After returning to her room, she remains awake and more or less active all night, except for zoning out for a short period around three in the morning. A little after nine, she hears footsteps; at least one of her parents is up. She gets dressed and goes downstairs to find both of them drinking coffee on the porch.

"So, Dad, about your body..."

He stares at her, bewildered. "What?"

"I think the Venn machines may be able to help you with your back injury."

"I don't know... We support you, but I don't think I'd want to change into something strange like that. No offense, you're an adult and you're not hurting anybody."

"Doesn't have to be strange. You can literally venn to just be yourself, but without the injury or pain."

"Oh. Well, maybe so. I want to know more about it, though."

"I read a little about it last night," Isabella's mom says. "The changes can last up to three years. And they're good at healing most injuries and a lot of diseases. I was going to bring it up after reading more today."

Isabella tells them how Sophia's parents have rejuvenated each other. "They look like they're in their early twenties, maybe, not that much older than Sophia." She doesn't mention how they switch sexes once a month or so.

“Oooh, that sounds great,” her mom says. “Don’t you want to be young again, Kevin?” She gives him a mischievous wink.

“Yeah... if it can make us young and healthy again without doing anything, uh, weird, I’d go for it in a heartbeat.”

“Let’s all look stuff up about it on our phones while we eat breakfast, and then share what we’ve learned,” Isabella’s mom says. “Then probably head over to the library if we don’t find out anything that says we shouldn’t.”

While her parents are fixing breakfast, Isabella texts Naomi and Sophia about their planned meetings later in the day. Naomi texts back a couple of minutes later, saying she’s busy getting ready for church, but she’ll text her after she gets home. Bianca replies saying her meat self is getting ready for church, but she can chat.

Sophia at 9:05 a.m.: Oh, and did you remember to rinse out your mouth, throat and storage tank with hot water?

Isabella at 9:06 a.m.: Oh no, I’ll do that while we chat.

Isabella gets a large mug out of the cabinet, fills it with water, and heats it up in the microwave while her mother is at the stove finishing up the bacon. She looks bemusedly at Isabella as she tilts it back and “drinks” it.

Isabella wonders if she should maybe jump around or do somersaults to make sure all the surfaces of the storage tank are rinsed off, especially after she left the milk residue in there to sour overnight.

She goes upstairs and closes the door of her bedroom before taking off her pants, popping open her arm compartment, and taking out the black key. She inserts it and turns it, then starts jumping and trying to do vaguely remembered gymnastics moves. She wants to do more. She looks at the window and remembers her idea that jumping down into the back yard would be perfectly safe for a being like herself, and a lot of fun too.

She jumps around some more and knocks over the lamp on her bedside table. That decides it: her bedroom can’t handle the black key.

She opens the window and looks out. Soft grass below, nothing that would break her.

Wheweee! Let’s do that again!

As she’s heading to the back door to go in, run upstairs and jump out again, she wonders if Bianca goes to church with Sophia and her parents, or if she stays home because she’ll share Sophia’s memories of going to church at some point. Isabella pauses and wiggles her arm again to open the other arm compartment where she keeps her phone, and texts Sophia and Bianca’s phone while pacing around the yard. Not looking where she’s going, she almost bumps into one of the big trees in the back yard. Looking up just in time, she decides to climb it, putting away her phone in her arm and snapping it shut.

When she’s halfway up, her phone buzzes. She pauses and opens up her arm; Bianca is calling. She answers.

“Hey, are you all right? Your last text was kind of incoherent.”

“Yeah, sorry, I wanted to ask you something,” she says very fast.

“Uh, even for a northerner you’re talking kind of fast. If you’ve got one of the keys in, what about take it out before we have this conversation?”

“Oh, yeah.”

She climbs down and takes out the key. With the phone in one hand and the key in the other, she’s at a loss for a moment about how to put the key away. Also, she notices her mother looking out the window at her.

“Uh, Isabella, you still there?”

“Oh yeah, sorry. I’m a bit out of it.”

“Did you take the key out? Did I guess right? Or is something else wrong?”

“Key...”

“Which key was it? Where are you, what are you doing?”

“Sorry. I used the black key to try and rinse out the milk and I am outside.”

“Can you explain your train of thought slowly for me? Because that last sentence made no sense. – Oh, and have you taken the key out yet?”

“Yes, the key is out.”

“Ooookay... I think you should have me or Sophia or another friend supervise when you use one of the keys. At least that one, and from the sound of things the cyan and magenta ones, too. It sounds like at least that one impairs your judgment like alcohol or marijuana. And what did the key have to do with rinsing out the milk and being outside? Where outside?”

“Oh, I jumped out a window using the key that gave me lots of energy.”

“Aaaaah! Are you okay? Nothing broke, did it? We’re more durable than meat people, but we can get broken, and it’s not fun! And you still haven’t explained about the milk! I’m coming over there.”

“Okay.”

As Isabella goes in the back door and heads for the stairs, her mom, who’s at the stove finishing up breakfast, asks her “Isabella, why were you running around the back yard and climbing that tree with no pants on?”

She holds up the key, then points to the lock and says, “It’s complicated.”

Her mom blushes and says, “Your room is the appropriate place for that, dear. And... we should have some girl talk sometime soon.”

“Okay.”

Isabella goes to the upstairs bathroom and drains her storage tank, then to her bedroom and puts pants and shoes on.

As her mental faculties gradually return to normal, she realizes that she could have put on a pair of sweats over the key, if she hadn’t been so impulsive and short-sighted. She thinks about maybe putting in the key while she has loose pants on, such that she can reach into her pants and insert the key without taking them off. Although that wouldn’t protect her from impulsively deciding to take off her clothes in front of other people for some fool reason. She goes downstairs and sits down at the kitchen table with her mom and dad.

“This Venn machine looks pretty good,” her dad says after swallowing a mouthful of bacon and hashbrowns. “I’ve been reading about lots of people who’ve gotten rejuvenated with it. But there’s also stories about people who got vanned into things they didn’t intend. Seems like those machines are kind of hard to control sometimes.”

“It’s all about trust,” Isabella says. “You have to trust what the other person will do.”

“Well, I know we can trust each other not to deliberately turn the other one into something weird and creepy, but I’m a little worried about not being able to get the machine to do exactly what we want,” her mom says.

“Being specific helps.”

“I guess so. And it seems like it’s pretty easy to change back if you don’t like what you get, or try again, so... I think we should try it, honey,” her mom says, and her dad nods.

Just then the doorbell rings insistently.

“Could you get that, Isabella?” her mom asks, and takes another bite of bacon.

“Of course.”

Bianca is at the door. Her plastic face isn't very expressive, but her body language is worried. She hugs Isabella as soon as she has the door open.

"I was so worried about you!" she cries. "Are you okay now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Talk to me," she says, following Isabella into the main part of the living room. "You were so incoherent on the phone... What were you doing and why? Has the black key worn off now?"

"Yeah, sorry," Isabella says, and tries to explain her course of action. It made perfect sense at the time, but she feels foolish now.

While she's explaining, her mom comes in, followed shortly by her dad. "Oh, hey, I don't think we've met. Are you a friend of Isabella from school?" her mom asks.

Bianca says, "It's a bit complicated, but basically I'm Sophia, just in a different body. The other one, the one you met when she came over last weekend, is on the way to church with my parents and my friend Lauren."

"Well... we'd appreciate some more warning when you're going to have guests over, Isabella. Sorry, Bianca, we were just going to head to the library and try using the Venn machine to fix Kevin's back injury and make ourselves young again."

Bianca looks at Isabella. She's apparently not going to tell them about the black key and the weird phone conversation without her permission. "Bianca surprised me by showing up here... a fun little surprise," Isabella explains.

"Well... let's not have any more surprises like that, okay?" her dad says.

"Actually," her mom says, "it's okay if you surprise your boyfriend with a drop-in visit as long as you clear it with us first. Let me give you our numbers."

Isabella winces a little and starts curling up the word 'boyfriend'. Bianca looks at her as if asking permission to say something. Isabella gives a small nod.

"Isabella is my girlfriend," she says. "I expect that was just a slip of the tongue, but you should know how much that kind of slip of the tongue can hurt trans people."

"Oh! I'm so sorry," her mom says. "I'll try to do better. I knew you were... well, I don't know the right term, exactly, I've been doing some reading, but work's been keeping me too busy to do as much as I want."

Isabella sits there, finding herself unable to speak, frozen. She nods in understanding, but curls in on herself, beginning to doubt everything.

Bianca hugs her and murmurs, "I'm here for you."

Isabella finally finds her voice. "Mom, Dad, you guys go ahead to the library. I need some time."

"Okay... I was hoping you could help coach us through using the machine, but your mental health is more important. If we can't figure it out, we'll go back and try again later when you're feeling better."

Soon Isabella and Bianca are alone, sitting together on the sofa, hugging still. Isabella curls up in Bianca's arms. If she could cry, she would.

"I'm such a fake," she mumbles. "Pretending to be someone I'm not..."

Bianca continues to murmur comfortingly as she holds her. "You're not a fake. You're a real you. Nobody else can tell you what kind of a you you are."

"But I'm not me. I'm some doll of a girl. I'm pretending I'm not myself."

"Semi-animate girls are still girls, you know. I spent all of junior year as an animate doll, and the only difference between us was my body wasn't as cool as yours. Or as pretty."

“It just feels real good, and so I tell myself it’s right, but I’m just lying to myself. Even when I vanned into a real girl, it was still just a disguise, basically. A costume. Not who I am.”

“It feels good because it is right. It fits as your old body didn’t. Maybe you’ll find a flesh girl body that fits even better, maybe no flesh body is going to fit as well as that one, but that doesn’t matter. You’re you, whatever you are. Lauren isn’t any less a girl because she’s a dragon most of the time. – And a plushie almost all the time.”

Isabella’s voice feels frozen again. She shudders.

“Do you want to call Carmen?” Bianca asks. “They should be free at this time of morning; they don’t go to church and they get up relatively early for a college student.”

“... Yeah... Bianca, there’s something I’m scared of. About my feelings. For my body, for you.”

“What is it, sweetie?”

“I worry that I just like this because it turns me on. That I want this because of sexual feelings. That I don’t want to be a girl because of gender, but because of sex or something. You see, the transformation stuff, it’s not just a fun thing. It’s a bit of a kink for me. And I’m scared that the reason I like my body is because of that. I’m worried that loving you and wanting to be a girl, to be a lesbian with you, is because I fetishize lesbian couples or get turned on by them.”

“Okay, I might shouldn’t say this, but someone I know went through the same thing. Feeling like her identity as a girl wasn’t as valid because she got turned on when she thought about getting a girl body.

“I’ll let her tell you more about it if she feels comfortable, but after she shared that with me, I read more about it. It’s not something Meredith had an issue with, but a lot of trans girls do. And it doesn’t make you not trans or not a girl.

“You know who else gets turned on by depictions of fictional lesbians? Actual lesbians.”

“But... I’m a guy. I’m a guy. It’s wrong.” Isabella covers her face in her hands.

“I don’t think you are, I think that’s dysphoria and depression talking. I’ve seen a lot of evidence that you’re a girl or something other than a boy, something with a lot of girl in you even if you turn out to be more non-binary like Carmen. But even if you were a guy, there’s no reason you shouldn’t vnn into a feminine mannequin or date me. I’m apparently more open to dating different genders than I thought a few weeks ago, but I already knew I liked boys, so if you decide after all this that you’re a guy after all, we can still date. And you can still wear a fem body whenever you want. There’s nobody who can tell you what being a girl or guy means except you.”

“... Bianca, I have a request, if you would be okay with it, and would let me.”

“What do you need, sweetie?”

“So first, can you use the venn machine yourself without disappearing?”

“No. With the way split mind venns work, once I’m split off from Sophia, I can’t use the Venn machine without disappearing and merging with her.”

“Well then, I have something I want to try with you and Sophia after church today. If that’s okay. Or just Sophia herself.”

“Of course.”

“This may sound weird, but the best way to describe it is the opposite of you and Sophia.”

“What do you mean? We’re split, so... do you want to be less split? Like all one piece like me, instead of separable interchangeable parts?”

“When you were embracing me, it made me feel like I just wanted to be a part of you, and you me.”

“So... Ohhh...”

“Yeah.”

“There’s a couple of ways we could do that, maybe. One, we’ll need a third party. Probably Lauren. You and Sophia can go in one booth, and Lauren in the other, and she’ll venn you two into a single body.

“Or – this isn’t something we’ve tried before, but I think it might work – you go in the machine with Sophia (and you’d better bring your carrying case of extra parts) and ask the machine to venn her into a duplicate of you. You can tweak each other to make sure your parts are interconnectable, and once you come out, you can, I dunno, put your pieces together into one body somehow?

“You’d need to make sure you’ve both got extra attachment points. Maybe you could put your head on her body along with a couple of your arms?”

“Make it so we are two mannequins who can share parts. Share each other. I like that.”

“Well, let’s plan on trying that after church. I’m going to text Sophia and Lauren. Normally they and my parents go out to dinner together after church, but I’m sure they’ll come home immediately after, when they hear about you feeling bad and needing help.

“Do you want to call Carmen while I do that?”

“Yeah.”

Carmen picks up after three rings. “Hey. Ah, have you picked a new name or are you still going by...?”

Isabella finds herself unable to speak, unsure what to say.

“... You okay?”

Isabella looks mutely at Bianca, as if asking for help. She gently takes the phone from her and puts it on speaker. “Isabella is having a panic attack from gender dysphoria. And Lauren’s at church, and I’m pretty sure Meredith will be as well, so we called you.”

“Okay,” Carmen says. “I’ll try to help, but next time, you should call the trans national hotline for an emergency like this. I’ll get you the number. To start with, Isabella, that’s a lovely name. I don’t know what kind of gender discoveries you’ve made in the weeks since we talked, but whatever they are, they aren’t invalidated by what you’re feeling right now.”

Isabella tries to talk again, and manages to get out a few somewhat-coherent words about how she’s been feeling.

“That’s impostor syndrome talking. And it’s not just trans people who get it, either. Most people who aren’t psychopathically self-satisfied doubt sometimes whether they deserve the good things in life they’ve got. And your beautiful name and body are things you do deserve; everyone deserves to have a body they can feel comfortable with and be called by the name that feels right.”

“Thank you, Carmen.”

“What’s something you’ve done recently that’s made you feel gender euphoria?”

“Get a girlfriend...” she says shyly.

“Hmm. Well, polyamory is cool and all, but I don’t think you can just get another girlfriend every time you’re feeling dysphoric.” Isabella giggles. “Is your girlfriend available?”

“I’m right here,” Bianca says. “We’ve been dating since last night.”

“Well then, Dr. Olmedo prescribes cuddles with your girlfriend. What else might make you feel euphoric? What are you wearing?”

Bianca plants a kiss on the top of her head while she thinks about her reply. “I’m wearing an old T-shirt and sweat pants... I was wearing them because I didn’t want to get my nice girl clothes dirty. I’ve only got the one outfit the Venn machine made my body with.”

“Bianca, how do you think she looks in it?”

“Sexy as all get out,” she murmurs.

“See there? But maybe it would help your dysphoria to go put on –”

Isabella impulsively interrupts. “Bianca, have sex with me,” she blurts out without thinking.

“Okay. . . I’m gonna leave you two to it,” Carmen says. “I’ll text you both the number for the hotline in a second, okay?”

Bianca says, “Bye, Carmen,” and hangs up the phone. She picks Isabella up, carrying her up the stairs. “Which one is your bedroom?”

“That one,” Isabella says, pointing. Bianca opens the doors and pushes it open, then sets her down on the bed and goes back to close it.

“Give me your keys,” she says.

Chapter Nine

Some time later, as Bianca is putting Isabella’s legs and arms back on, they hear some noise from downstairs – the front door opening and closing again.

“Shall we see who arrived?” Bianca asks.

“Sure.” Isabella gets up and gets dressed in her nicer clothes once her legs are both snapped on, and they leave the room and walk down the hall. Two people who look sort of like the old wedding pictures of her parents, but not quite – more like their siblings or cousins – are coming up the stairs as they reach them.

“Hey, Mom and Dad.”

“Hey, are you feeling better, Isabella?” the woman, presumably her mom, says.

“Yeah. I am. I have the best girlfriend.”

“That’s great,” her dad says. “Speaking of girlfriend, or rather wife, what do you think? Did I marry a hottie or what?”

She blushes and swats his arm.

“...I’m gonna hang out with Bianca for a while longer. See you guys later,” Isabella says, dodging the question.

“And when she was having a panic attack earlier, I asked Sophia to come over,” Bianca adds. “Lauren might come too. I hope that’s okay?”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” her dad says with a wink. Her mom drags him into the master bedroom and closes the door.

“Well,” Bianca says, “they look happy. And I don’t think there’s any risk of them interrupting us. Do you want to go another round with the keys, or just sit and talk? There’s so much we still don’t know about each other.”

“Let’s talk. It sounds nice.”

Bianca suggests they sit on the porch and talk, since it’s a pretty day and that way Lauren and Sophia won’t ring the doorbell and disturb her parents when they arrive. They sit hip to hip on the porch swing and talk about their childhoods, books and movies and games they like, things Isabella wants to try venning into, things Sophia and her friends and family have venned into, theories about the venn machines she wants to test, and on and on. Then the Ramseys’ minivan drives up and Lauren and Sophia get out, talking briefly to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey before they drive off.

“Hey. Are you feeling any better?” Sophia asks, sitting down next to Isabella on the swing and kissing her. Lauren sits in the rocking chair not far away.

“Yeah. Did Bianca text about my request? I forget if I asked her to.”

“Yeah,” Sophia says. “Shall we head to the library, then?”

They all pile into Sophia’s car and head to the library. Bianca drives and Lauren sits in the other front bucket seat, so Isabella can snuggle Sophia in the back.

“Bianca,” Sophia says, “I want to merge and split first thing when we get to the library, so I’ll have your memories of this morning.”

“Sure,” she says.

Isabella giggles. “I’m curious what that will be like.”

“Oh?” Sophia says. “Am I going to get some memories of something funny?”

“You might; I’m more curious to see you deal with two very different memories of us getting together.”

“And would you like to try splitting, too? Maybe into a little plushie like Lauren or Jada’s other self, so you can stay with me all the time?”

“Yeah. Maybe you could make one for me as well.”

“Of course. Do you feel like talking about what happened earlier, or do you just want to wait and let me get Bianca’s memories? It’ll only be a few minutes.”

“Unless there’s a long line. There sometimes is on a Sunday afternoon,” Lauren adds.

“Maybe wait. And Lauren? Can I talk to you later about this? You would be able to relate, I’m sure.”

“Of course,” Lauren says. “I know what dysphoria is like. I had to live with my old gross boy body for over a year after I figured out I was trans, before I was able to be myself for more than a few hours here and there.”

Isabella’s phone in her arm compartment buzzes. She opens it and sees a text from Naomi asking if she’s still on for hanging out. Naomi is having dinner with her family now, but Isabella is welcome to come over right after that, in about an hour.

Isabella texts and tries to explain the situation. **You’re welcome to meet up with us, or I could come over later in the day**, she adds.

oh wow, Naomi texts back. I don't know if I can help with that, but I can try to be moral support? want me to come to your house after dinner instead, or check if you're still at the library then?

or we could punt to next weekend

Isabella: **Maybe. Could be nice to have a girls hangout. Never had that growing up, because well, you know**

Naomi: **all right, I'll check with my parents, it should be fine**

Just as Bianca pulls into the library parking lot, she texts **i'll be there <3**

“Maybe I could talk to Lauren while you and Sophia merge?” Isabella suggests as they get out of the car.

It looks like there’s five couples in line for the machine. Sophia and Bianca get in line, while Isabella and Lauren walk a little way down the sidewalk from the library as they talk.

“Do you want to talk about how it felt?” Lauren asks. “Or how it came on? What triggered it?”

“My parents referred to me as Sophia’s boyfriend. I wasn’t upset with them, exactly, they haven’t had that long to get used to me being a girl – but it just kinda sent me spiraling.” She tries to explain her feelings of imposter syndrome and her worries that her gender feelings are just a kink.

“Oh, that sucks,” Lauren says. “And yeah, I get that. Back when I was first figuring out I was trans, I felt pretty much the same way. Like I wasn’t really a girl, or a dragon, just a pathetic loser boy who got off on the idea of becoming one.”

“So you were who Bianca was talking about.”

“Yeah. When I was feeling like that one day, Meredith gave me a pep talk that really helped a lot,” she says. “Basically hatched my egg in one conversation and helped me see myself as a girl and not a boy who wanted to be one. I’m not as good with words as she is, but I can try.”

“Okay.”

“So basically, what you’re feeling is something a lot of trans people feel? Not all of us, but a whole lot. Because most people have sexual fantasies, that’s normal for anybody who’s not ace and even some ace people, I’m not super clear on all the varieties of aceness, but anyway. But trans people often have trouble imagining themselves having sex in their original bodies, because they’re so dysphoric, and the idea of having sex like that makes us more dysphoric.

“So we imagine ourselves having sex in female or intersex bodies or whatever kind we’d rather have. That’s just like cis people do, only they get to skip a step. And maybe we make the transformation part of the fantasy – I know I did, and it seems like a lot of the trans people I know online did.

“But that doesn’t invalidate the desire to have a body that fits right. That’s a basic human right. Everybody should have that, and now that we’ve got the venn machines, almost everybody can. Unless your desired body just has to be radioactive or something.” She smiles.

“And it definitely doesn’t invalidate your identity. Only you can decide whether you’re a girl or an enby or what kind of girl or enby you are, and you shouldn’t let dysphoria or imposter syndrome influence that decision.”

Isabella tries to speak, but can’t, and just hugs Lauren. They stand there hugging for a few moments, and Lauren says, “Do you want to walk back now?”

Isabella nods.

The line has moved pretty fast, and it’s Sophia and Bianca’s turn as soon as the people in the machine finish.

“Come on,” Sophia says as they get close. “We can do this in one round instead of two, if it’s okay with them?” She asks the couple behind her and Bianca if it’s okay if Isabella gets in line with them, as she’ll be using the Venn machine with them anyway.

“I thought only two people can use the machine at once?” the man says.

“Technically as many people as you can squeeze into the booth can use it at once,” she says, “but me and Bianca are one person split into two bodies, and my girlfriend’s going to be in the other booth.”

“Oh, sure,” he says.

The machine opens up and a couple of pixies fly out, zooming up into the trees overhead and chasing each other through the branches.

“Let’s do this thing!” Sophia says, and kisses Isabella while Bianca sets up the machine.

Isabella enters the right-hand booth, holding the carrying case, and Sophia and Bianca enter the left booth. As soon as the doors close behind them, Bianca vanishes. Sophia puts her hands to her head for a moment and leans against the wall.

“You okay?” Isabella asks.

“It’s always a bit of a rush, merging memories when one or both of us has had some unusual experiences,” she says. “Good or bad. In this case it’s both, and...” She opens her eyes and stares at Isabella hungrily. “I am super turned on right now.”

“Well, let’s focus on one thing at a time.”

“Yeah, time for that later. Let’s see...” She purses her lips. “I think the best way to do this is for me to make some changes to your mannequin body, mostly adding extra attachment points and making sure all the

connections are compatible with another body like yours in both directions. Then I'll press my green button, and all you have to do is change me into a copy of yourself before your green button phases out."

"Okay. But maybe I should tweak you to have a distinct face?"

"I was thinking we could distinguish ourselves by switching out eyes and hair and stuff with extras from the case. Trying to tweak the copy's face could make the attachment points incompatible."

"Fair enough. We can do that."

She starts talking in a low voice, picks out an image, then another one, and then says, "I'm going to press my green button. You ready?"

"Yes!"

Isabella suddenly finds her torso wider, and it seems like her head is off the left side instead of centered. "Make her a copy of me," she says quickly, then looks over the images for the one that looks most like what she thinks she probably looks now. She selects it and presses the green button, which has faded like the moon to waning gibbous.

The doors open. She picks up the carrying case of extra parts and it seems bigger, but not much heavier.

Outside, Lauren says, "Remind me which one is which?"

"I'm Isabella." She raises her hand.

"And I'm Sophia. Let's go back to your house, Izzy – you said you'd invited Naomi over?"

Isabella feels warm and fuzzy to hear her girlfriend call her by a pet name. "Yeah. She'll meet us there."

"Then we'd better do our experiments with these bodies at your house instead of mine. Lauren, you want to keep hanging out with us or should I drop you at home?"

"I'll come with you if Isabella wants me there," she says.

"Sure. The more the merrier."

Isabella and Sophia put their carrying cases in the trunk. Sophia asks Lauren to drive, while she gets in the back seat with Isabella.

"Let's see," she says, and wiggles her left wrist. It pops open, revealing the remote control and a bunch of keys. "I wouldn't count on the remote buttons doing the same thing as before, or the keys of particular colors either," she says. "It's hard to change one thing without cascading minor changes you didn't ask for."

Isabella compares the remote to the old one. She didn't have all the buttons memorized, but she's pretty sure both the colors and layout are different.

Isabella pops open her arm compartment and compares her remote with Sophia's side by side; then they swap remotes. They look identical, but Sophia confirms that they're different from the old one.

"They've got more and slightly smaller buttons, probably because we've got more attachment points," she says. "Well, here goes." She pushes the leftmost button on the top row and Isabella's wig pops loose.

"Well, now we know who is who," Isabella comments, taking off her loose wig and setting it in her lap.

Isabella tries the second button on the top row and Sophia's ears both fall off. "Oh. Let's get those back on you."

They find and fasten on one of them, but one seems to have disappeared. "Probably fell down under the driver's seat," Sophia says. "We'll have to look for it after we get to your house. And we'd better not do any more tests until we get there; looking for our eyes like that would be even harder."

A few minutes later, they arrive at Isabella's house. After Isabella, Sophia and Lauren have looked under the seats and found Sophia's left ear, Isabella unlocks the front door and leads the others up to her bedroom.

“Do you want to both lie down while I test the buttons?” Lauren asks doubtfully. “It might mean fewer body parts getting lost.”

“Good idea,” Isabella says.

“Let’s get undressed,” Sophia says, “so the buttons that open compartments will be obvious.”

“Yeah. That makes sense.”

As Sophia removes her pants, Isabella notices that she doesn’t have a keyhole in her crotch. She finishes undressing and sees that she doesn’t have one there either. “I see you removed the keyhole this time.”

“What?” Sophia looks at Isabella’s crotch, then at her own. “That wasn’t intentional. Since we’ve got keys in our arm compartments, I’m pretty sure we’ve still got keyholes. They’ve just moved. Maybe they’re hidden under something?”

“That will be fun to find.”

They both hand their remotes to Lauren and lie down together.

“Last time, we had Bianca take notes while Sophia tested buttons and I helped catch parts that were falling off. I’m gonna have to play all three roles this time, so it’ll be slow.”

“That’s okay,” Isabella says.

“What about just record what we say on your phone?” Sophia suggests. “And describe the position and color of the buttons out loud before you press them.”

“Yeah, we can transcribe it later,” Isabella adds.

So Lauren starts a recording and begins testing buttons. The next couple of buttons decouple Isabella’s nose and Sophia’s eyes; the one after that, Isabella’s head.

“Try putting her head on the other attachment point on top of my torso,” Sophia suggests.

“Okay. . . it’ll help if you sit up.” Lauren picks up Isabella’s still wigless head and prepares to plug it into the other head slot on Sophia’s body. “Oh, hey, it looks like you’ve got a couple of keyholes in back of your head!” she exclaims.

“Well, now we know where those went.”

“Check the back of my head once you’ve got her attached,” Sophia says. Lauren snaps Isabella’s head onto Sophia’s body, then detaches Sophia’s wig and leans around to look. “Yeah, two keyholes.”

Sophia asks, “Can you feel my body? Or control any of it?”

Isabella can’t feel anything below her neck, the same as when her head is detached. She tries to move Sophia’s right arm, but nothing happens.

“I feel nothing, just my head. Maybe we needed to be in the machine together for this to work?”

“Yeah, probably. Let’s keep testing the remote buttons, though. I want to see if that changes when we put the arms from your body on the extra attachment points of mine.”

“Yeah. Then maybe we can go back in together and have someone make it so when our parts are attached, we feel everything.”

Lauren continues testing buttons, and it doesn’t take her long to find the ones that detach arms. Sophia picks up Isabella’s left arm and attaches it to the socket where the bottom of her rib cage would be. And Isabella can feel it! She wiggles her fingers. Soon the other arm is in place, too. She gives Sophia and herself a hug.

The next button opens Isabella’s chest cabinet, and the next one pops off her breasts. Sophia sticks them on below hers, and as soon as they snap into place, Isabella can feel Sophia’s hands on them. She places her hand on Sophia’s, holding it there.

Sophia swivels her head and kisses Isabella. Lauren clears her throat. "I'm gonna leave you two alone for a while..." Just then, the doorbell rings.

"Lauren, that must be Naomi," Isabella says when they break the kiss. "Could you let her in?"

"Sure." She slips out of the room and closes the door.

"We probably shouldn't keep Naomi waiting too long," Sophia says, but she keeps gently kneading Isabella's breasts.

"Yeah. How do we want to go downstairs?"

"I could walk us down?" Sophia offers. "Or I could put you back together. Which would you rather?"

"I'll let you decide. It's always fun that way."

"All right." Sophia kisses Isabella again, and starts getting dressed. Their blouse has extra neck and arm holes, but it's still tricky to get it on, and they both wind up giggling a lot as they fumble their way into it. The pants are easier, and they don't bother with shoes.

"Lead the way," Isabella says.

As Sophia walks their shared body to the stairs, they meet Isabella's mom, looking disheveled, coming back upstairs. "Oh... Are you both Bianca and Isabella?"

"Sophia and Isabella," Isabella says. "Sophia and Bianca re-fused when we vanned."

"Refused to do what?"

"Re-fused," Sophia enunciates carefully. "We merged. And then we mixed and matched our parts. How are you and Kevin enjoying your rejuvenation, by the way?"

"A lot, as I'm sure you can tell. I'll get back to enjoying it while you hang out with your friend. Don't forget to offer her a drink and snack."

She goes back into her bedroom and Isabella and Sophia go downstairs. Lauren and Naomi are sitting in different chairs in the living room.

"Hey, Naomi," Isabella says, and waves.

"Hey, Isabella. And the other head is Sophia, right? Lauren's been telling me, but I can hardly believe it!"

"Yeah. It's weird. Though we are each only in control of certain body parts. I had the idea of going back and using the machine while Sophia and I were combined, and making the small change that we share control of the body or something."

She nods. "It's pretty cool either way. Are you feeling better since this morning?"

"Yeah, I am."

Sophia sits their shared butt down on the sofa. "Thanks for coming over. I know you had other plans, but I appreciate you supporting my girlfriend."

Naomi squees. "You're dating? Oh em gee, congratulations! Since when?"

"Yesterday," Isabella replies.

"Last night," Sophia amends.

"Awesome," Naomi bumbles. "And the change of plans is no big deal. I was gonna let you dress up in some of my clothes, since you've been wearing the same thing days in a row, but nothing I have would fit that new body. You're gonna have to switch back before school tomorrow, though? You don't share all the same classes."

"No, we don't. We can try getting us to share a body so we can use history on it later, and then maybe the four of us can have some fun with the venn machine."

“So you want to head over there now? I need to use your restroom first if we’re going to the Venn machine.”

“That’s fine.” Isabella directs her to the ground-floor restroom. “Oh, and Naomi, can I get you a drink or snack before we go?”

She pauses just before walking down the hall to the bathroom. “I just ate at home, thanks, but I wouldn’t say no to some cola or sweet tea if you’ve got it.”

“Of course.”

Sophia gets up and goes to the kitchen. “You’ll have to tell me where the cups are,” she says, and then walks them over to the cabinet Isabella points out. “You want to get one out?”

Isabella reaches for the cabinet and opens it, but with her arms lower on the body than she’s used to, she can’t reach the upper shelf where the disposable cups are. “Can’t reach it. Could you?”

“One of those disposable ones, right?” Sophia grabs the stack and holds it where Scarlett can pull off the top one, then puts the stack back. Going over to the refrigerator, she gets out the three-liter bottle of Cheerwine. “Hold it while I pour, okay?” Working together, they have Naomi’s soda ready by the time they hear the toilet flush.

“You want anything while we’re in here, Lauren?” Sophia calls out.

“Another cup of soda, please.”

They repeat the process and bring both cups to the living room.

“Before we go, I’m curious if the keys being in the back of the head changed anything,” Isabella says.

Sophia flexes her wrist and pops open her arm compartment, taking out a key – a light purple one – and presses it into Isabella’s hand. “You want to try? Here.” She swivels her head a hundred and eighty degrees and holds her wig hair out of the way. “Can you get to the keyholes or do I need to take off my wig completely?”

“Yeah, let me just. . .” Isabella can see the keyholes clearly, a couple of inches apart near the base of Sophia’s “skull.” She sticks the key in the right-hand slot and turns it.

“Oh, I thought of another idea!” Sophia exclaims. “What if we turn into a two-headed dragon, and Naomi could be a dragon or wyvern or something and we’d all be dragons together?”

“Interesting,” Isabella comments.

“Or we could venn into a tiny mannequin, or more like a doll I guess, and Lauren can venn Naomi into a dollhouse? A haunted dollhouse that opens and slams doors and makes the lights flicker, it would be spooky. Or you could be a doll or a whole family of dolls, you haven’t tried having multiple bodies yet have you, and I’d be a Baba Yaga dollhouse and run home on the sidewalk and. . . Oh, I’ve gotta write this down. . .!”

“I think that one might be enhanced creativity?” Lauren speculates with a laugh.

“Yeah,” Isabella says, and giggles. “Let’s take that out for now. Though this will be useful to remember.” She takes the key out, but Sophia keeps excitedly babbling about her ideas for another minute – not just cool venns, but ideas for videos, biology experiments, podcasts. . . “Oh! We should totally do a podcast together! Lauren and me said we’d do a podcast together, but we never. . .” She trails off, falling silent for a moment before saying, “Whoa. That was fun.”

“Yeah. Definitely keeping this transformation for later use.”

“I wanna try that,” Naomi says. “I tried doing Nanowrimo last November and only wrote about fifteen thousand words before I got stuck.”

“We’ll need to specify what we want one of your keys to do,” Sophia says. “I didn’t tell it what keys to make, just that I wanted more keys this time.”

“Fair,” Isabella says. “Can I try something with the same key, though?”

“Sure! Just turn your head so I can reach.” Sophia inserts the key and turns it.

Ideas bubble up and float by faster than Isabella can talk. “We could venn into a pushmi-pullyu or a snake with a head at both ends or a set of nesting dolls but with multiple hollow bodies so I’m inside you and you’re inside me and so on or a deck of cards where I’m the hearts and you’re the diamonds and I’m the clubs and you’re the spades and Lauren and Naomi could play with us only we’d need another player or two so maybe Mom and Dad can join in once they’re done boinking and you’d have enough for bridge or...”

She barely notices as Sophia rounds up the others and they all go out to the car. Her logorrhea trails off halfway to the library.

“Do you want to pick one of the dozens of ideas we came up with just now, or do what we were originally planning?” Sophia asks when she can get a word in edgewise.

“What we were planning to start, but then maybe we can experiment,” Isabella says as Sophia takes the key out. “Can I see the key for a moment? I want to see what the other key slot does.”

“Okay then. Lauren, would you please venn us? And sure, let’s try that. I suspect it’ll do the same thing again, but the two slots would let us combine the effects of two keys at once. No way to be sure without trying, though.”

“Yeah, let’s do it.” She inserts the key in Sophia’s left-hand slot.

“Oh, about the podcast, the first episode would be like a recap of my videos on how to venn someone into something semi-animate, but then we’d do episodes showcasing different doll and mannequin bodies and cool things you can do with them you can’t do with organic bodies like your puzzle box body or the Baba Yaga dollhouse I was talking about or that time Lauren lived on my desk and our parents didn’t know she was there—”

“Sophia!” Lauren hisses. “Ixnay!”

Isabella takes out the key. “Well, that answers that.”

“— Oops. Anyway, then we’d do an episode about venning into a little doll about an inch high and riding a drone or a homemade rocket, or no, why not venn into a drone or rocket directly, duh, of course you or Lauren could venn into little dolls without reverting to your yucky original body but you couldn’t do that if you venned into a rocket —”

Chapter Ten

Sophia’s torrent of ideas lasts until they get to the library and get in line. An older couple in line ahead of them whispers, “Mary Jane,” knowingly.

“...no actually I’m high on creativity but that gives me an idea, we can cure drug addiction by venning addicts into semi-animate bodies for long enough their original body goes through withdrawal and they won’t have drug cravings any more than they want air or food, there’s anecdotal evidence it works but nobody’s done a study yet, we need to be doing it on a national scale, not that marijuana is addictive like that, it just reminded me —”

“Anything you want us to venn you into, Lauren?” Isabella says over Sophia’s excited ramble.

“Yeah, you can go ahead and venn me into a body for work tomorrow. I’m not picky, anything that can see, hear and talk and is strong enough to carry trays will do. Not male or masculine-looking, obviously, but it doesn’t have to be super feminine.”

“Alright, then. Are we in agreement with what Lauren is doing for us, Sophia?”

“— oh, since the altered state keeps going after you take out the key, what if you put in a different key while the previous state is still going? — Oh, right, we were going to venn into a single body with shared control, but did we talk about what other properties it was going to have?”

Isabella offers to put the key back in, and Sophia turns her head to present the keyholes. Then Isabella asks if she has any ideas for the shared body.

“Sometimes you’re really clumsy when you first share a body with someone, so I think we should be some kind of taur for greater stability, maybe not four legs, six might be safer, and I think we should consider your idea of having a head at each end, obviously we’d make it so we can turn three hundred and sixty degrees like now so we can face each other, but the torsos would be prettier if they didn’t have to be wide enough for two heads and you’re so pretty inside you deserve to always have a pretty outside but you can have ugly days too if you want, I don’t know why you would but I don’t want to tell you how you should look like Ethan, he was an awful boyfriend –”

Isabella decides to let her keep talking until they get into the machine; she enjoys listening to her talk. Then she has another idea. “Could you put my light purple in?” she asks.

“– oh sure, sweetie, just wiggle your wrist and turn the back of your head toward me, there you go, this is gonna be awesome! What do you think we should put on our underbelly? I like the idea of the wind chimes your musical body had yesterday but I just realized that might have made you feel dysphoric cause it might remind you of boys’ dangly bits, I’m sorry –”

“It’s fine, I never thought of that. But maybe we can stick to just being plastic living dolls for now? Or –”

“– dolls plural like we’ve got two bodies and both of us control both of them? I don’t know if that’s possible and if it is we’d have to do a bunch of trial and error to find out –”

Meanwhile Isabella is rambling: “No, I meant one body, a girl-shaped body although we should try out some other new stuff, like maybe give ourselves a silky skin over the upholstery, and maybe we can inflate or deflate our boobs with a knob or yeah our butt too and we should make it so we can switch vision modes with a switch like in that first body or rather a knob with several settings so we don’t have to replace our eyes and be temporarily blind, although that should be one of the settings on the knob, and the knobs and switches should be in an arm compartment not in our chest –”

“– oh I thought of a cool idea for your work body, Lauren, you want me to tell you or should it be a surprise?” Even as she rambles, Sophia sets up the machine. The doors open, Lauren steps inside, and Sophia walks their shared body into the other booth –

– and Isabella immediately goes blind and deaf. She’s still having a flood of ideas, but can’t talk, and she can’t feel her arms, but she can feel her torso and legs. She realizes that with their altered states, they forgot about the parts they left in her bedroom, and with Isabella bringing less than half her vanned mass into the machine, it’s like when Bianca goes in and vanishes.

She feels like her torso and legs are lying on a bed. She assumes she’s still in her own bedroom and no one has moved her to another bed somewhere else; who would do that? She starts trying to sit up, but she’s not sure how she’d grope her way anywhere without arms. And she’s a bit distracted by the continuing flood of ideas; losing her head and the purple key hasn’t stopped it.

Not long after the creativity jag ends, she feels herself being picked up. She realizes she’s not totally deaf like a human with no ears would be; she feels someone’s face, it feels like, pressed against her upper chest where her breasts would attach, and then a distorted and muffled voice: “I’m so sorry, Izzy, can you forgive me? I’ll take you to the Venn machine as soon as Lauren and I can get you down to the car, but I have to warn you, since you don’t have eyes or arms to use the machine, it might revert you to your original body. Just for a few seconds! I’ll venn you into a form from your history and press my green button right away, and then we can get in line to merge into one body like we planned, okay? I love you so much, but we need to make sure we don’t make decisions while we’re using keys or stuff like that.”

Isabella feels like crying with happiness, but can’t express herself in any way except wiggling her toes. She hears muffled footsteps and voices even more muffled, and then she’s being set down in what feels like a car seat.

Sophia, I love you, she thinks.

She feels someone's arm around her armless shoulders, undoubtedly Sophia's, all the way to the library. Then she feels herself being lifted out and carried a short distance, and set down on her feet. Again, she feels Sophia's face pressed against her upper chest and her voice saying, "Lauren and I will stand on either side of you and keep you from falling over while we wait. We'll nudge you in the back when it's time to take a couple of steps forward."

The line advances one, two, three times, and then she finds herself inside a booth of the Venn machine, back in her original body. She hardly has time to feel any dysphoria before Sophia says "History," and whacks at her screen a couple of times. Then Isabella is back in a mannequin form again – apparently the one she wore to school the previous week.

"Wow. That actually wasn't too bad. It was so fast."

"I'm sorry I messed up and you had to go back to your old body," Sophia says. "I said it earlier, but I'm not sure if you could hear me."

"I could, though it was kind of muffled. It helped a bit, and it wasn't as hard to be back in my original body as I was afraid of – I guess cause I knew it was just temporary."

Sophia smiles. "Yeah, semi-animate forms can sometimes hear a bit even without ears, depending on what material they're made of. I wasn't sure, with the soft padding we'd added to those forms; that's why I put my jaw up against the hard plastic where we detached your boobs. We'll get back in line once the doors open and next time we'll try sharing a body, right?"

"Yeah. I like how that sounds."

Once the doors open and they get out of the way of the next people in line, Isabella hugs Sophia as tight as she can. As soon as they let go of the hug, Lauren asks, "Are you feeling okay? Being blind and deaf like that with no warning must have been scary."

"Yeah, but honestly, when you held me –" Isabella looks lovingly at Sophia. "– I loved that. I felt loved. I – I love you, Sophia."

Sophia smiles and hugs her again, murmuring "I love you" in her ear.

Lauren watches with an indulgent smile and Naomi coos "Awwwww!"

Then Lauren says, "You two lovebirds want to get back in line?"

All four of them get in line, although Naomi isn't planning to get vanned this time around; it'll be Isabella and Sophia in one booth and Lauren in the other. There's just two couples in line ahead of them, two white human girls, a cat-taur of some kind (maybe leopard or cheetah-based, Isabella thinks?) and what looks like a toddler wearing a yellow sundress, but must be a vanned adult.

After overhearing some of the girls' conversation, the cat-taur says, "You're planning to merge into one body?"

"Yeah," Isabella says.

"You'll need to be sure to venn into a form with no separate parts or clothes, then. All one piece. Otherwise whichever of you is lighter weight will turn into the clothes or the lighter part and the heavier one will be the form you were trying to share."

"Oh, yeah," Sophia says. "I should have thought of that. I've read about it, but I've never had anyone I wanted to merge with and was willing to do it, so I guess I forgot some details of what I read about it." She turns to Isabella. "You'd be okay just being a solid animate statue without separable parts like you've been having?"

"Of course. You are all I need."

The cat-taur and Naomi both go "Awwww!"

The machine opens up and two tumbleweed-like things roll out and across the parking lot to the sidewalk. The human girls go inside, and less than a minute later come out as two guys; then the cat-taur and toddler go in and come out before long as a couple of black women in their thirties.

And now it's their turn. Sophia sets up the machine, and she and Isabella go in the left-hand booth while Lauren goes in the right, and Naomi goes over to sit on the bench with Sophia and Lauren's purses. Isabella is pretty sure her wallet and stuff got left at the house.

She reaches over to hug Sophia, not wanting to let go until they're together. Sophia hugs her from the side as she starts designing a body for Lauren to use for work on Monday, while Lauren works on a body for Isabella and Sophia.

After a few minutes of selecting images and making modifications to them, they're ready, and press their green buttons. Isabella finds herself still in an inanimate feminine body, but she feels more solid than before. Not hollow with lots of compartments inside. Her clothes seem to be painted on, and she doesn't have two distinct breasts, but a broad bulge in her upper chest like a pair of breasts under a sweater.

She can't feel Sophia's thoughts or emotions, but after a moment she feels herself say, without intending to say anything, "We're gonna have to take turns moving the body or else we'll be really clumsy. You want to walk us out of the booth or shall I?"

"You can move us," she says. She feels her shared body walk out of the booth.

Lauren's new body is similar to one of the ones Sophia suggested during her creativity trip, a centauroid doll with six legs, and a flat surface on her lower torso's top. "You can put trays on your back there," Sophia says. "If it works like I intended, you've got a gyroscope inside that will keep it level while you walk around."

"Cool!" Lauren says.

All three of them walk over toward Naomi, who looks up from her phone as they approach. Isabella can't completely refrain from trying to walk, though she's trying to relax and let Sophia do the walking for them, and they're a little wobbly.

"That's both of you?" she asks, nodding at Isabella and Sophia.

"I think so. We need to practice moving, I'd say. Right, Sophia?"

"Yeah," she says. "How about if me and Isabella walk around the parking lot and library, practicing moving and switching control and stuff, and you two get in line if Naomi wants to venn into something?"

"Sounds good," Naomi said. "Here's your purse back, and can you take care of mine while I'm getting vanned?"

Soon, with a purse slung over each shoulder, Sophia is walking along the parking lot next to the row of cars on the right. She reaches the sidewalk and says, "Okay, now you walk us back and into the library, and I'll take over as we pass the front desk, okay?"

"Okay," Isabella says, "I'll try." There's a moment of unsteadiness as she takes over from Sophia, and she wobbles and waves their arms to regain her balance, but manages not to fall. She starts walking slowly back toward the library, keeping close to the cars so she can grab one if she loses her balance.

As she enters the library and reaches the front desk, she relaxes and lets Sophia take over. Sophia walks up the stairs toward the second storey, which seems to be where the majority of the books are, the downstairs being devoted to computers, study desks, reference books, and a children's area. When she reaches the landing halfway up, she murmurs, "Now you take us the rest of the way up."

Isabella holds onto the rail and carefully walks the rest of the way up, arriving in a corner of the second story near the 000-099 Dewey Decimal number shelves. "Have you been inside the library since you moved here?" Sophia asks quietly. "Except to look at your vanned body in the restroom?"

"I don't think I have."

“We should get you a library card. But they close early on Sundays and you need to bring proof of residence to get a card. Let’s walk back and forth between the shelves and avoid the aisles somebody’s browsing in.”

“Sure.”

They zigzag back and forth through the shelves, looking at the books and moving slowly. Sophia picks up a couple of books in the science and engineering area to check out, and when it’s Isabella’s turn to move the body, she holds onto them while she keeps walking.

Then they’re out of the nonfiction shelves and walking through the fiction. They don’t seem to separate out genres here, it’s YA fiction of all genres and then adult fiction of all genres.

After they weave their way through the shelves, Isabella walks them back to the stairs and down to the reception desk. Sophia takes over as she checks out her books, and then Isabella walks the body outside to look for Lauren and Naomi.

They spot Lauren standing near the benches, which other people are sitting on. There’s a tiny kitten riding on Lauren’s flat back; a couple of tween girls are cooing over her, their mom standing by indulgently.

As the merged girls walk up, the kitten mews excitedly at them.

“I think we’ve found Naomi,” Isabella says. “Want a ride on our shoulder, kitty?”

She mews twice. “That means yes,” Lauren says. “One mew is no.” Isabella carefully picks her up and sets her on their shoulder. She purrs and rubs her head against theirs.

“Cute!” Isabella squees.

“Y’all want to go for a walk before we venn Naomi back into her four-armed schoolday body?” Lauren asks. “I can’t fit in your car in this body, so I’ll need to walk home and walk to work tomorrow anyway. So you could walk me home and then bring Naomi back to the Venn machine.”

“Sure, that works.”

Isabella and Sophia trade off at every cross street, walking south a few blocks and then east a little ways to the Ramseys’ house. “You want to go in and hang out before we go back?” Sophia asks. Naomi mews twice.

“Maybe Sophia and I could have some time exploring together,” Isabella says, attempting a wink. It turns out this body doesn’t have eyelids like her previous mannequin bodies. “Just a thought, though.”

“All right,” Lauren says. “Naomi and I will leave you two lovebirds alone for a while.”

Mr and Mrs Ramsey aren’t in the living room as they pass through to Sophia’s bedroom. Lauren, with Naomi on her back, continues down the hall to her bedroom.

As Sophia and Isabella enter her room, Isabella asks, “So where do we begin?”

“Let’s take turns touching each other – ourselves,” Sophia says, lying down on her bed.

Chapter Eleven

Half an hour later, Isabella says, “Well, we should probably check in on Naomi.”

“You get us up and walk us, I’m too tired,” Sophia jokes.

“I’m just as tired,” Isabella says happily. They aren’t tired at all. They get dressed, and Sophia walks the body down the hall. Lauren’s bedroom door is open; the room is simply furnished, with a futon, a chest of drawers, and two mismatched bookshelves stuffed full of books and notebooks. Lauren is loafing like a cat on the futon, her six thin legs folded under her, while kitten-Naomi tries to climb up one of the shelves.

Naomi loses her footing and tumbles to the floor, almost but not quite landing on her feet.

“So cute!” Isabella exclaims. “Alright, Naomi, let’s head back.”

She trots over toward them, pausing to rub against Lauren on the way, who pets her gently. Then she stands in front of them and mews. Isabella picks her up and snuggles her before setting her on her shoulder. “See you later, Lauren,” Sophia says.

“So any requests for what you get venned into, Sophia?” Isabella asks as they leave the house and head back to the library.

“I think I’d better go back to my schoolday body, and so had you. We might make some slight tweaks in your case, but only if they don’t have cascading effects on your appearance.”

“Of course. One question. What if we have a little version of us to go with the other?”

“Sure. I need to split into Sophia and Bianca, and I’ll just split again after that and make the other body tiny. Mine can be an animate doll who can stay in your chest cabinet when you’re not at home, but my Sophia self is gonna be human, so I’ll need your tiny self to be something I can carry with me at school... hmmm...”

They take turns talking and walking as they walk back to the library with Naomi on their shoulder. After a bit, they get the hang of letting one person walk continuously while they hand control of the voice back and forth, ending their utterances with “over” like old-time radio operators.

When they get to the library, there’s hardly anyone in line. It doesn’t take long to venn Naomi back into her four-armed human girl body, and for her to then split them into two copies of the body they’ve been wearing.

When they emerge, they find that a couple of girls Isabella vaguely recognizes from school have gotten in line, and when they go in, they take a long time over whatever they’re doing to each other.

“Hey, Sophia,” Isabella asks, “could you maybe try giving me a more ball-jointed doll appearance? If you could keep some of the other functions as well, I think that could be really cool.”

“I could do that with your small body, but not with your big body unless you get your parents or mine to witness another change form for the school. They don’t want you changing your appearance that much without notification.

“So let’s review. You’re going to pick the form from my history where I’m both Sophia and Bianca, and I’ll pick your schoolday form from your history. Although we’ll probably have to wind up venning you into that form again by the time we’re done splitting. Then I’ll go in with you and leave Bianca out here, and we’ll split each other again. When you’re splitting into non-identical bodies, it’s doubly tricky to get what you want on the first try, since you’ve got to get two bodies right at once, so I usually don’t bother. Just focus on getting my tiny body small enough to sit comfortably in your chest cabinet if you take out the shelves, and I’ll focus on getting your small body to have the ball-jointed form you want, and a clip to fasten onto my charm bracelet so I can carry you around. Then we’ll leave our tiny bodies with Bianca and go back in with our big bodies, whatever they turned out to look like, and venn into the bodies the school expects us to have. We can do more fun temporary venns on our next date, but it’s getting late and I need to get home after this.”

“Of course. Let’s do it.”

They wait and they wait some more.

“What’s taking so long?” Isabella wonders.

“Maybe they’re –” Sophia begins to speculate, but just then the doors open and a cloud of bats swarms out of the right-hand side of the machine and scatters in all directions. The other girl emerges from the left-hand side with a fancy black dress with red lining and a beehive hairdo of electric blue hair, and cries, “Fly, my pretties!”

Sophia laughs as she sets up the machine.

Once inside, Isabella says “History” and looks through a ring of bubbles showing Sophia’s recent forms. The paired forms of Bianca and Sophia’s usual bodies are near the ten o’clock position, with their shared form at the top and her other recent forms going clockwise from there – she’s gone through a lot of temporary bodies in the last couple of days. She selects the Sophia-Bianca pair and waits a moment for Sophia to pick her schoolday mannequin body, and they press their green buttons.

Then Isabella picks up the carrying case of her extra parts and walks out. Sophia and Bianca, or rather Sophia's human body and doll body, are walking in lockstep.

Naomi is nearby, looking at her phone. She looks up and says, "Hey, would you mind giving me a ride back to your house, Isabella, so I can drive home? My parents want me home for supper. I don't want to interrupt you when you've got a series of venns still to go through, but..."

"Sure. Should we do it now or after we finish?"

"Let's give her a ride back to your house," Sophia says with both bodies. "I don't have to be home as urgently as she does, and your house isn't all that far away. Besides, there'll be fewer people using the machine if we wait a bit." Four more people have gotten in line while Isabella and Sophia were venning each other.

So they all go to Isabella's car and drive to her house, where Naomi gets into her own car to go home. Isabella drives back to the library, and as Sophia predicted, there's no one in line for the machine and no one using it.

"Alright, let's do this," Isabella says

Sophia carefully navigates her Bianca body over to the bench and sits it down, then says, "You'd better set up the machine for us this time, it's tricky doing separate things with two bodies when your consciousness isn't split yet."

So Isabella sets it up for a three-month-long change and goes in. Sophia goes in the other booth with her human body, and starts working on Isabella's double forms. Isabella starts talking, specifying that she wants two animate doll bodies of vastly different size and the size she wants Sophia's smaller body to be – small enough to have plenty of elbow room if she puts her in her chest cabinet – and the qualities it needs to have: able to see, hear, talk, walk, manipulate things. She gets a number of options, and sorts through them, picking one and then looking for variations that look better until she's got what she wants.

A minute or two later, Sophia says "I'm ready if you are," and they press their green buttons.

It's the first time Isabella has had two bodies, and it's extremely disorienting. She's seeing out of two pairs of eyes, one low down and one much higher. With her small body's eyes, she can see Sophia's tiny body across from her, and Sophia's and her own large bodies towering overhead, but with her big body's eyes she can see the tiny adorable dolluscules down on the floor. It feels like both of her bodies are ball-jointed, but otherwise they're not that similar. The tiny one is more feminine, with a poofy green dress, while the larger one is more androgynous, wearing a white shirt and pants with abstract designs in dark purple lines and circles.

"This is so weird," she mumbles, testing her limbs. Both bodies move, almost but not quite in sync.

"Yeah," Sophia says. "Our small bodies have such short legs, we should probably bend down and pick them up. It's okay if your small body imitates the same motions, that won't keep it from getting scooped up."

"Makes sense." She carefully stoops to pick herself up.

She's simultaneously holding a tiny doll in her hand, less than six inches high, and being held in the hand of a colossal giant sixty or seventy feet high. The giant cups its hand so she can't fall off and she finds herself trying to walk, but held too tight to get anywhere, while she's also walking out of the Venn machine. Bianca comes over and takes the tiny doll bodies from her and Sophia. The doors close behind them, and Bianca sets up the machine for them without comment. Then Isabella and Sophia walk right back into the same booths they just exited, the doors close, and Isabella finds herself sitting in Bianca's hand next to tiny-Sophia, no longer experiencing double vision.

"Yay!" Sophia says. "I love being tiny and I don't get a chance to do it often enough. I guess I need to come up with a new name for myself now that I've got three selves at once. I used my middle name for 'Bianca'."

"Why not get your girlfriend to name you?" Bianca booms.

"Only if she names me," Isabella teases.

"Hmmm... I accept your challenge!" smol Sophia declaims, making a dramatic gesture. "Let's see... Thalia, Zenobia, Marie (that's a reference to Marie Levoisier and Marie Curie both), Ann (Raggedy Ann, she's a doll

in old books and movies)... how do you feel about Hypatia?"

"No, they sound either too fancy or not for me. I thought of a name for you, though: Amber."

"Oooh, like Sofia's sister in Sofia the First! I like it! Let's see. Megan, Luna, Mackenzie, Melissa, Sonya, Erin...?"

Isabella hums and shakes her head.

"... Moira, Valentina, Florence, Jenny, Kerri, Violet...?"

"Violet! I like that."

"I dub thee Violet!" Sophia declaims.

Just then the doors of the machine open and their big selves come out in the same bodies they've been wearing to school recently, Sophia a beautiful human girl with some enhanced strength and senses and Isabella as a mannequin with various compartments and a carrying case of extra body parts.

"We were talking about names for our tiny selves –" Sophia begins, but Amber interrupts, "We already picked names! I'm Amber, she's Violet."

"Oh. Well, then," Sophia says, looking amused. "Let's get you home with Izzy, and I'll take Violet home with me."

The big girls let Violet and Amber sit on the dashboard as Sophia drives Isabella home. At first Violet finds it fun and exhilarating, trying to keep her balance on the sloping dashboard in a moving car with no seatbelt. She can't see a lot, since it's after dark and after they're out of the downtown area with its street lights, the road ahead is only lit by Sophia's car's headlights and occasional headlights of oncoming cars. Then Sophia makes a sharp turn onto the road Violet's big self lives on, and she slips and falls off the dashboard, bounces off the gearshift, and lands under Sophia's feet.

"Whoops. I can't pick you up until we get there," Sophia says.

"That's okay!" Violet calls out in the hopes she can be heard. It's darker down here. She can make out the shadowy shapes of Sophia's legs, the accelerator and brake pedals, and something under the driver's seat. She walks over to see what it is.

It's even darker under here, but feeling her way along it (it's several times her size), she figures out it's a window scraper. There's also a few pieces of trash, it seems. A bottle cap that comes up to Violet's knees, a torn wrapper of some kind big enough for her to use for a poncho or blanket, and some other stuff further back and impossible to make out in the dark. She walks back out into the dim light.

The car slows and makes another sharp turn, and she grabs hold of the nearest thing to keep from falling over, which happens to be Sophia's shoe. Then it stops.

"We're here," Sophia says. "Hold still while I get out so I can look for you, Violet." The engine turns off and Sophia and her big self get out. Then Sophia shines her flashlight at the floorboard.

"Over here!" Violet says, waving her arms. Sophia reaches down to pick her up.

"Don't want you to get lost again," she says. "Let's see..." She takes Violet by the clip that's been dangling down her back like a braid and clips her to her top, just above her right breast. Violet clings on excitedly.

Sophia walks around the car and kisses Violet's big self goodnight. Violet waves goodbye to Amber, riding in her big self's hand. Then they go into the house and Sophia and Violet get back in the car with Bianca.

"I'm so excited!" Violet exclaims as Sophia pulls out of the driveway. "How are you, Bianca, now that you're separated again?"

"I'm doing okay," she says. "You and me will be staying up most of the night while Sophia gets the sleep her meat body needs. Any ideas?"

“We can talk all about love and ideas and gossip about Isabella and Sophia.” Violet realizes with a shock of surprise that she’s thinking of herself as different from Isabella. Maybe it’s because of seeing her as a giant?

Sophia drives home and parks, and she and Bianca get out and go inside. Sophia’s parents are sitting on the sofa watching the news.

“How did things go?” Sophia’s dad asks.

“Isabella started feeling better by the time Lauren and I got there, and we hung out with her and Naomi, another girl from school...” Sophia tells them a judicious amount of what happened that day, concluding her tale by saying, “And this is Violet, Isabella’s other self. Say hi, Violet.”

“Hi!” Violet waves at them. She’s finding herself doing that more, probably because she feels it will be easier for big people to see than smaller gestures or expressions.

“Oh, you’re tiny!”

“Easy to carry around,” Sophia says.

“Is that a clip built into her head?” her mom asks.

“Yeah, I’m gonna keep her on my charm bracelet,” Sophia says.

“I’m her lucky charm,” Violet pipes up.

“Just as long as you don’t help her with tests, Violet,” Sophia’s mom says.

“Okay.” Violet gives them a thumbs up.

Sophia and Bianca go to their bedroom, and Sophia starts changing into her sleeping clothes. She takes off the Venn-produced top and pants, with Violet still clipped to the top, and hangs them up in the closet, but keeps the closet door open. Then she takes off the venn bra and folds it up in her underwear drawer. “I only wore those for an hour or less, so they aren’t dirty,” she explains. She puts on an oversized t-shirt and then starts digging around in a box of stuff from under her bed. “Do you remember what I did with that charm bracelet?” she asks Bianca.

“I only split from you an hour ago, tops,” Bianca says. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Violet giggles.

“Ethan gave it to me when we were dating, and I threw it in a box or drawer or something when we broke up,” Sophia explains, turning toward her.

“Guess I’m gonna make it romantic again.”

Bianca starts looking through the drawers of her desk, then the chest of drawers. “Here it is,” she says, holding up a slightly tarnished copper bracelet with four or five charms dangling from it. Bianca approaches Violet and says, “Want to try it? I’ll take you off again overnight and you can get back on in the morning before she leaves for school. I need to polish it before morning, if Sophia’s going to wear it to school.”

“Sure.”

Sophia stands up and comes over to the closet, where Bianca is unclipping Violet from the top and clipping her onto the bracelet between a T. rex and a DNA double helix. She hands the bracelet to Sophia, who slides it onto her left wrist and holds it up to her face.

“Wow,” Violet marvels. Sophia looks like Mount Rushmore, except a lot prettier, and not as colonialist.

“You want to stay on there while I read for a while before bed, or get off and hang out on the bed or desk until I fall asleep?” Sophia asks.

“Maybe I’ll hang out with Bianca.”

“Okay.” Sophia hands the bracelet to Bianca, who puts it on; it’s looser on her smaller wrist, and Violet wobbles around more than before as Bianca closes the laptop screen, unplugs it and tucks it under her arm, then grabs a couple of books from the desk.

“You see anything you want to read during the night?” she asks Violet, holding her up toward their bookshelves. It’s mostly science books, with a few histories and biographies and just a dozen or so novels, mostly science fiction. “There’s more fiction in Meredith’s room, which is where we’re gonna spend the night,” Bianca adds.

“Not really. I’d love to just talk with you, as we are similar.”

“All right. Good night, Sophia.”

“Night, Sophia,” Violet echoes.

“Good night. Gimme a kiss, Violet.” Bianca dangles Violet in front of Sophia’s mouth, and her lips practically engulf her.

“You are a giant!”

“Yeah, I guess so. Fee Fi Fo Fum, I smell the plastic of a . . . Chicagoan!” She sniffs theatrically and Bianca snickers.

“Eee!” Violet exclaims, clasping her hands.

“Good night for real,” Bianca says, and carries Violet, the laptop and the books out of the room.

Chapter Twelve

Meredith’s bedroom is a bit bare of decoration, presumably because she took the photos and posters with her to college, but the bookshelves are still more than half full, mostly of fiction. Bianca sets down the books and laptop, sits down in the desk chair, takes off the bracelet, and unclips Violet, then sets her on the edge of the desk. Then she plugs in the laptop and opens the lid.

“So what do you want to talk about?” she asks.

“I wanna gossip about Isabella and Sophia.”

“Ooooh, sounds like fun. You want to hear about Sophia’s dating history?”

“Yeah. Sounds fun.”

“Well, you know a little about Ethan already, and he’s pretty much it. She dated him most of sophomore year and about halfway through the following summer, but they broke up because of her wanting to veen into weirder stuff than he liked. Not long after that, she swore off dating high school boys, and said she might date again in college or more likely grad school, but you changed her mind. Before Ethan, there was Troy, who she unofficially dated in freshman year – our parents wouldn’t let her actually date yet, but she sat and held hands with him at lunch, and they kissed once – no, twice, I guess. And Bradley, who asked her to the winter dance in eighth grade. They were okay, not as controlling as Ethan, but not mature enough to be worthy of her, either.

“She never had sex with any of them except for Ethan, and with him only when they were vennd into different species that shouldn’t be interfertile. She went as far as sequencing their DNA in the school lab and making sure they had different numbers of chromosomes.”

“I’ve never had sex either. Or I guess Isabella hasn’t. Or we haven’t.”

“This morning didn’t count? Or this afternoon when we were sharing a body?”

“Those were both great, but I guess I felt like they weren’t really the same thing as sex? But thinking about it more, yeah, that counts.”

“Whew,” Bianca says, wiping imaginary sweat from her forehead. “For a minute I thought we were going to have a long wrangle about what sex is. Veterans of the ‘is a hot dog a sandwich?’ wars would tremble at our wrath!”

Violet giggles, then changes the subject. “I wanna hear Sophia’s feelings for Isabella. I wanna hear about what she thought from their meeting until today. Since you fused, you would know all that now.”

Bianca looks up at the ceiling. “At first, we were just happy to make another friend who was into venning. Julianna venns with us sometimes when she doesn’t have family stuff going on, and Lauren will venn into almost anything feminine and animate, and we have work friends who venn even when they don’t have to for work, but Hadley’s parents won’t let her use the machine until she turns eighteen – that’s not too far away though, fortunately. So another venning friend is great. And then you confessed you had a crush on us, and we were embarrassed but kind of flattered?”

“And we started thinking about whether we were into girls, and we had to admit we were kind of into you, at least. And we started feeling more and more into you all week at school.

“Then we hung out with you after work yesterday, and I could see how much you were into each other, and teased her until she admitted it. And I told you I thought you’d be good for us, and you know the rest.”

“Yeah. Bianca, what is it you like about your body?”

“Not getting tired and only needing an hour or so of ‘sleep’ a night.” She makes air quotes for ‘sleep’. “I get so much reading done while Sophia’s asleep. Our junior year, we weren’t split, but we spent nearly the whole year as a living doll like this, closer to the height of Sophia’s meat body. We had a lot more time for studying for school, recreational reading, and extra reading to get ready for college classes, plus listening to podcasts and other fun stuff.”

“Nice.”

“Not needing to eat is cool too, most of the time, but sometimes we missed Mom and Dad’s cooking in a way even though we don’t feel hunger like this. We’d change back into a meat body for Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter dinners.”

“Makes sense.”

“Then last summer we decided to split in two and have one body be organic, so it can enjoy food and stuff, and one living doll, so we can study while the other one’s at work or asleep. It was Lauren that first got us into splitting, and I’m pretty sure her girlfriend Jada’s the one who got her into it.”

“That sounds awesome.”

“What do you like about being a living doll?”

“I love just being an object. It’s nice and relaxing. Honestly, I’d love to just be yours and Sophia’s when you are in college. Though I worry I would just be a burden, with you having to do all the work.”

She nods. “We tried venning into pure inanimate objects a couple of times, a dress for Julianna to wear and a nice fountain pen for Meredith to write with, but it wasn’t really our thing. We like being semi-animate, though. And I don’t think you’d be in the way or anything at college. You don’t need to eat or have your litterbox cleaned like a meat pet. Lauren’s plushie self, Lydia, lives with her girlfriend Jada at college, and gets on well with Jada’s roommate too.

“We’d have to see what our roommate’s like and whether it feels safe to tell them you’re a living doll or whether we need to keep that a secret, though.

“Our plan is to keep splitting every week or two, but I’ll probably wear a smaller body than this, big enough to turn the pages of a book but not big enough that the room feels crowded with three full-size people in it. Or four, if there’s me, you, Sophia and Sophia’s roommate.”

“Yeah. I guess I also worry you might outgrow me. Meet someone you like more.”

“I can’t promise we’ll be together forever. We’re high schoolers, and people go through a lot of personality change between eighteen and twenty-two. But you fit pretty well with us, so I don’t think it’s very likely at the moment.:

“Thanks. . .” Violet kind of wishes Bianca had said something more romantic, but on further reflection, she’s grateful for the honesty.

“Would you be open to a poly relationship, though? If we meet someone we like at college and want to keep dating you, too?”

“Maybe. Perhaps one of the two of you can be more for Isabella and I,” Violet says half-seriously.

“Oh, that’s a possibility. Would you want to keep splitting once you’re living with us at college? Maybe leave Isabella here in Brocksboro, living with your parents and working maybe, and you, maybe a bit bigger than you are now but still pretty small, living with me and Sophia at college?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure, honestly. I would be content just being with you.”

“I feel like your parents would be more okay with you living with us if you’re also at home and working or looking for work. But you’ll be eighteen by then if you aren’t already – we still don’t know when your birthday is! There’s so much we don’t know yet.”

“Right, how about you ask stuff like that about me?”

“So. . . when’s your birthday? Ours is February ninth.”

“April sixteenth is ours.”

“Square numbers squad represent!”

“Yeah. Mine is cooler since the month is also squared.”

“Now I’m jealous of your birthday. Hadley’s birthday is coming up at the end of March, and Lauren’s birthday’s April tenth. She’ll be turning nineteen a few days before you turn eighteen. Meredith’s also a sixteenth baby, November sixteenth. She’ll be twenty.

“Anyway, tell me about Chicago. What was the neighborhood you lived in like?”

Violet tells her something about her old neighborhood, well inside the denser part of the city, but not directly downtown. She wishes she could find the words that come so easily to Bianca and Sophia to tell her what the streets, buildings, shops, and parks meant to her, what it was like to live there.

“We’ve always lived in Brocksboro,” Bianca says. “The biggest city we’ve ever been to is Atlanta – my uncle and aunt and cousins live in Marietta, that’s one of the Atlanta suburbs, and we spent some time walking around downtown with them last time we visited. Went to the aquarium and the Coke Museum. The Coke Museum was a ripoff, but the aquarium was awesome; it made me want to venn into an otter or dolphin. Would you want to venn into an animal sometime?”

“Maybe. Sounds like fun.”

“What kind of animal would you like to try?”

“I’d love you to surprise me.”

Sophia eyes Violet for a moment before saying, “I know you like having us surprise you with cool venns, but sometimes I feel like you’re leaving too much to us to decide? Is it hard to think of an animal you like, or hard to assert yourself, or what? I want to understand you better.”

“Honestly, I guess I just don’t really know what I want. That’s why I lean on you. You seem to always know what I want more than I do.”

“Hmmm.” She gets up and goes over to the shelf, then comes back with a North American wildlife guide.

“Would it be easier to pick something out of these options than come up with something on your own?”

“Yeah. I’d like that.” Violet is too tiny to turn the pages easily, so Bianca holds it in front of her and turns the pages slowly.

“There,” Violet says. “A fox.”

“A fox, hmm?” Bianca says. “Which of these would you prefer – red fox, kit fox, gray fox? Or maybe one of the ones that aren’t native to North America, like the fennec fox or sand fox? We could venn into foxes together and get one of our selves to drive us to a park with a lot of woddss, there are several within an hour’s drive, and run around and be silly.”

“Hmmm... I guess the kit fox?”

“Nice! Kit foxes are smol and cute, like you.” She pats Violet on the head with her pinkie finger.

“Yeah, whatever fox I choose, I just wanna be cute.”

“I don’t think there’s any risk of you ever not being cute, silly.”

She opens a new document on the laptop and types:

New Forms for Isabella and Violet

Then:

Kit fox or semi-animate kit fox doll

“Maybe if I like being a fox, we can make a fox doll form for me too,” Violet adds.

“What else?” Bianca asks, turning toward Violet

“Hmmm. Well, a full size ball-jointed doll would be fun. Maybe a feature for me as a mannequin that makes it so I can’t move, making me like a real mannequin.”

“Hmm... maybe we could use a key for that?”

“Maybe the key even works after it’s taken out and has to be turned again to deactivate it. That way it isn’t in the way. Then you could dismantle and use me like any old mannequin. And maybe I could try being like a robot or drone.”

“Sure, we can try that. Or!” She stands up and opens Meredith’s closet door, taking down a box marked “Halloween” from the top shelf. She rummages in it and brings out a little Grim Reaper about twice as tall as Violet and sits it down near her, but not facing her, and winds it up. It jerks along in little hops, and she catches it just as it falls off the desk.

“How about making you a wind-up doll? You can only move when your action is wound up.”

“That sounds awesome!”

Bianca adds some notes to the document. “If we make you a robot, what kind of robot would you want to be?”

“That’s hard, as there are so many kinds. A humanoid one that looks like me for sure, though.”

“We’ve got a friend at work who usually venns into robot bodies, but he has a pretty wide repertoire. Cute little utility bots like Wall-E, tall bosomy fembots, clanky Robbie the Robot style things, a mini-car factory robot...”

“Maybe he can help me with that. Speaking of which, I filled out an application there, to at least have the option of working there on the table.”

“Oh, awesome. It’s a great place to work – as service industry work goes, I mean. I’ll be glad when we can start working somewhere that pays better and doesn’t involve constant customer interaction, but I’d kind of miss working with people who are venned into such a wonderful variety of shapes.”

They go on talking about forms to try out for a while; then Bianca says, “I need to do some studying now. You want me to get out a book for you to read or let you watch a video on my phone?”

“Can you lend me your phone?”

She turns the volume on her phone down and props it up in front of Violet, opens up one of Sophia’s textbooks and brings up another document on the laptop, and takes notes as she reads.

Meanwhile

Isabella watches Sophia drive away with her tiny other self, then goes into the house. Her mom and dad are playing Scrabble in the dining room.

“Hey, Bella. Oh – is that a vanned person you’ve got in your hand?” her mom asks.

“Yep.”

Amber waves at them. “Hi, Heather and Kevin! I’m Amber, one of Sophia’s selves. I hope you don’t mind if I spend the night.”

“Sure,” Isabella’s dad says. “Just be sure to get her to the venn machine before school tomorrow.”

“Oh, Sophia is at her house. We split me and Sophia, so we each have a small version of us to keep with us.”

“Oh!” her mom says. “That’s – wow. I’d like to hear more about that sometime.”

“Sophia would be the expert on it, I think.”

“Yeah, I can explain,” Amber says. “Isabella, you want to set me down on the table there, or wait and let me explain it to them tomorrow or sometime?”

“No time like the present,” Isabella says, carefully setting Amber down next to the Scrabble board, and sitting down at the table with Amber and her parents.

Amber describes the process of splitting into multiple bodies, then splitting one’s consciousness across them. “The really hardcore folks have multiple bodies without split consciousness,” she says. “That’s tricky to do and I’ve never mastered it, not that I’ve spent all that much time trying. I think most of the people who are really good at it are plural, but not all. But me and Sophia have been split into two people, usually one human and one animate doll like Isabella, for a good chunk of the last year. This is the first time we’ve split three ways for very long, though.”

“That sounds fascinating, honey,” Isabella’s mom says to her dad. “Would you want to try it sometime?”

“Let me think about it a while,” he says. “And let’s talk it over when the kids aren’t around.” He winks at Isabella and Amber.

“It’s great for having extra time in the day,” Amber says. “Our grades were already good, but they’ve been near-perfect since we started splitting like this and merging our memories just before each test or quiz. Our Bianca-self does most of the longer-range study while our Sophia self studies the stuff the teacher is going to go over in the next couple of days, and does our homework. And we quiz each other. I think we’ll keep doing it when we’re in college, although we’ll have to make Bianca smaller so she doesn’t take up too much space in the dorm room, and after graduation we’ll keep doing it so one of us can be at work while the other’s running errands or doing recreational stuff.”

“I like the sound of that,” Isabella’s mom says. “Being able to work and get housework done and goof off all at the same time. . .”

“You said you split too, Isabella? One of you is at Sophia’s house?” her dad asks.

“Yep. Her name is Violet.”

“How long are you planning to stay split before you merge again, like Amber was saying?”

“Not sure. Whenever it feels right to, or if Sophia wants to merge with Amber, I would do the same with Violet.”

“All right. How about let us know how it feels once you merge?”

“Sure. Sounds like a plan.”

So saying, she picks Amber up gently and carries her upstairs, along with the carrying case for her extra parts.

“So Amber, how are you feeling?”

“Excited! It’s been a while since any of us have had tiny bodies like this.”

“Are there any things you want to do like this in particular?”

“Could you get me a couple of pins and let me climb up you? And I guess probably change into some clothes you don’t mind if they get torn a bit. You can fix them in the venn machine if they do, anyway.”

“Sure, which do you want first?”

“You’d probably better change clothes before I start climbing.”

“Sure, one second then,” and Isabella changes into an old T-shirt and sweats. She sets Amber down on the floor and takes down a couple of thumbtacks from the bulletin board on her wall, then bends down to hand them to her. It looks like the tacks are bigger than her head.

“This should be an interesting experience.”

Amber hefts one of the tacks. She doesn’t seem to have any trouble with the weight, and Isabella remembers something about ants being able to carry things many times their weight. But it’s awkward and she has trouble wielding it with one arm. “Could you maybe cut off the heads of the tacks?”

“Sure, I’ll see what I can do.” She thinks she might need to borrow her dad’s wire-cutters. They would probably be in the utility room downstairs. So she picks up Amber again and heads downstairs.

Isabella sets Amber down on the shelf beside the toolboxes as she rummages through them until she finds the wire-cutters. Then she takes the tacks out of her pocket and clips them short, handing them to Amber. She’s able to dual-wield them without much difficulty.

“That seems much better for you.”

“Yeah! I’m all ready to climb Mt. Isabella!”

“Alright, then let the climb begin. . . only let’s wait until we’re back in my bedroom.”

Isabella carries her upstairs, then asks, “How do you want me to stand or sit for this?”

“You can stand anywhere you like. Or sit at your desk and do stuff, but that would reduce the difficulty by half.”

“Then let’s stand up.”

Isabella sets her down beside her feet and stands up again, holding still and looking down. Amber reaches up and sticks one of the tack-pins into the side of her shoe, then hauls herself up as far as she can until the tack is down at her waist level, then reaches above her head with the other tack and sticks it in.

Isabella can’t feel anything until she transitions from her shoe to her pants leg. After that, her pinpricks sometimes go deep enough to penetrate her upholstery. “This feels weird. I feel it, but it doesn’t hurt.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Amber calls out as she creeps up Isabella’s pants leg half a body length at a time.

“Making good progress, it seems.”

When she’s near the hem of Isabella’s sweat pants, Amber pauses just above the pocket. “Oh, a cave! I’ll just explore this for a bit before I go higher.” She climbs down inside. “I’ll call this Right Pocket Cave,” she says, her voice muffled by the fabric. A couple of minutes later, she emerges. “The depths of the cave are filled with some sort of fluffy debris.”

“Look at you, all covered in lint.”

“Onward and upward!” Amber cries. Before long, she climbs onto Isabella’s shirt and continues until she’s just below her right breast.

“Hey there, cutie,” Isabella says.

“I’ve reached a steep overhang. Perhaps if I divert to the side I can find a merely vertical ascent.” Amber works her way around to Isabella’s side, then climbs to the level of her upper breasts, then sideways again until she’s on top of her right breast.

“Good job, sweetie!”

Amber walks over to the neck of Isabella’s shirt. “A deep chasm! I must be careful not to fall iiiinnnn. . .” She ‘accidentally’ plunges into Isabella’s cleavage, and whatever she says next is muffled.

Isabella giggles. “So adorable!”

Amber falls nearly to the level of Isabella’s shirt hem before catching herself with one of the tacks, then starts climbing up the inside again.

“Doing great, Amber, keep it up!”

When she reaches the neckline of Isabella’s shirt, she navigates sideways until she reaches her wig, then starts climbing that. Isabella feels a little tug on her hair until Amber stands on the middle of her scalp. “Wow, I can see so far from the summit!”

“You’re so adorable, Amber.”

She giggles, then declares, “Look out below!” and jumps like a grasshopper, landing in the middle of Isabella’s bed.

“Careful. Well, I guess as a doll you don’t need to be careful.”

“I am invincible!” she proclaims.

“Well, at least as falls go.”

Isabella decides to test that idea by grabbing her and holding her up by a single leg in front of her face.

“How is that invincibility going for you?”

“Aaah! Mount Isabella is a giant! No wonder it was so steep!”

Isabella flops onto the bed, placing her on her chest. Amber bounces up and down on her right breast, giggling maniacally. Isabella lies there and enjoys watching her.

After several bounces, Amber lands on her neck, then crawls into her cleavage.

“What are you doing there?”

“Exploring!” she calls out.

“Tell me what you find, then.”

“This cave seems to have two enormous stalagmites with no corresponding stalactites. Very curious!”

“Very curious indeed.”

Isabella blissfully reflects how much happier she’s been since meeting Sophia. Her reflections are interrupted as Amber squeezes between her breasts and crawls along a wrinkle in her shirt until she emerges from the lower hem.

“There you are!”

Amber returns along the outside of Isabella’s shirt, climbing to the top of her left breast and gazing at her adoringly.

Chapter Thirteen

“You are so cute, Amber. I couldn’t have thought of all these ideas as a small person.”

Amber comes closer to her face and pats her on the chin. "It's cool! There's plenty of time to explore stuff later. But for now, there's a tweak I made to your form that I want to test. Could you take off your shirt and open your chest cabinet?"

"Sure. One moment, please." She sits up, forgetting for a moment to take Amber off first and quickly grabs her before she falls. Then she finishes taking off her top with Amber in her hand.

She wiggles her wrist to pop open her arm compartment, then opens her chest with the remote. Amber leaps from her hand into her chest cabinet and rummages around.

"Aha!" she cries, and Isabella's insides light up.

"Oh, that's adorable!"

"So I won't have to sit in the dark when I come to school with you," she explains. "But maybe you could clean out some of this clutter, whatever you're not gonna need at school?"

"That's a very good point. How about we go through everything?"

It seems to be mostly the same things as before – tool-fingered hands, wigs, eyes, noses, breasts.

"Leave the boobs for me to rest on," Amber says. "Otherwise, what do you think you might want to swap things out for during a bathroom break or something?"

"How about a new pair of boobs, and the tooled hands?"

Isabella removes everything except a spare pair of breasts and the hands, setting them on her dresser or desk.

"Wanna spend the night in there, Amber?"

"Nah," Amber says after a moment's thought. "I'll spend plenty of time in here during the school day tomorrow. Let's spend the night talking, or maybe playing games if we can find one I can play."

"Let's talk. I like the sound of that."

"All right. When you moved here, did you drive, or fly?"

"We drove; that way we could save a bit of money in terms of moving trucks."

"Did you see anything cool along the way? Or was it just boring interstates almost the whole way?"

"There wasn't much to see. I also slept most of the way."

"Hah, yeah. I've slept through big chunks of some of my family's road trips. But the last couple of trips, like to Georgia to visit my uncle's family, I was in a form like this. But bigger, of course. So were Mom and Dad and Meredith and Caleb – he's my big brother, he's going to UNC Greensboro – so none of us had to stop and use the bathroom or eat, and we didn't need much rest, so we drove almost nonstop. And we took surface roads so it was a lot more interesting.

"We went out west to the Appalachians, keeping north of I-40 most of the way, then south through the Cherokee Indian reservation and the Smoky Mountains into Georgia, and we passed through a bunch of tiny mountain towns. We stopped for gas in this small town on the north edge of metro Atlanta and the lady who was pumping gas next to us kept staring at us like she'd never seen an animate doll before."

"I mean, if I'd seen that at the time, I would have acted the same, honestly. Until I moved here, I didn't think the venn machines were as capable as they were."

Isabella and Amber talk until they hear Isabella's parents coming upstairs, then in quieter voices for hours more after that. Around four in the morning, Amber reminds her to relax for a while and let herself get some mental rest. She puts on some quiet low-key techno and relaxes, and zones out for a while.

When she notices the clock again, it's not exactly time to get ready for school, because her new body doesn't get dirty as fast as an organic one, but it's time to start thinking about getting ready.

“What color wig do you want to wear today?” Amber asks, rummaging through the ones on Isabella’s dresser. This time around, the Venn machine gave her slightly different options: there’s the pastel green one her body came with, a light blue, a dark blue, a bluish-purple, a bright red, a pink with a slight tinge of purple, and a silvery reflective one. No yellows or oranges this time, or white or black.

“Hmmm. Let’s go light blue.” Isabella pushes the button to eject her wig and it pops off, then she picks up the light blue wig, which has long, straight hair in two braids. She presses it down on her scalp and the attachment points grab hold of it so it won’t fall off.

“Alright, next would be the outfit.”

From the boy T-shirts and polo shirts she took into the machine with her, it’s given her a variety of blouses, tank tops, cold shoulder tops, and girls’ T-shirts, most either one solid color or with abstract designs on them. She’s also got a handful of skirts, capri pants, yoga pants, and women’s suit pants, plus one nice dress – it’s yellow and would complement her blue hair fairly well.

“What do you think about this dress, Amber?”

“It has pockets!” she gasps. “Yeah, that’s not as wonderful as it used to be, cause a lot of vanned garments for women have pockets, and vanned garments for men don’t necessarily have them unless you specify, but trust me, four years ago it was really hard to find dresses with pockets. Go ahead, try it on!”

“Alrighty. I’ll do just that.”

She already had her top off so she could keep her cabinet open and Amber could ride around in it, but now she takes off her pants, sets Amber on the dresser, closes her compartments, and slips the dress on over her head. Amber giggles. “Other way around, I think.” Isabella pulls her arms out of the sleeves and turns it around, and it sits better over her breasts this way. “Let’s see if I can do this,” Amber says, and runs to the edge of the dresser, then leaps! She hits Isabella’s belly just above the pockets, scrabbles to grab hold of the fabric as she slides down, and manages to land in one of the pockets.

“This might be nicer than riding in your chest cabinet,” she says.

“Yeah. Also makes it easier for you to interact with people.”

She giggles. “Be careful who you show me to!”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, some of the teachers can be kind of hard-assed about people carrying vanned fellow students around. I think it’s ‘cause they assume the other student is missing class, which is often true if the person who vanned them doesn’t know how to split them. And they don’t want small vanned creatures ‘disrupting class.’” She makes finger-quotes for the last bit.

“I’ll keep that in mind, then.”

Isabella starts sorting through what she needs to put in her backpack, or one of her arm compartments, and what can stay home today. “With this dress, you can use your calf and thigh compartments too,” Amber suggests.

“Oh, good point. Let’s see what I want to put in there.”

Except for the chest compartment, none is wide enough for a textbook or full-sized notebook. But the thigh compartments can hold a mini-notebook or two, and all of them have room for pens, pencils, erasers or the graphing calculator. Isabella fills them with school supplies, then finishes repacking her backpack, gets her shoes back on, and she’s ready to leave for school. She’s got plenty of time before she has to leave.

“So Amber, anything you wanna do before school?”

“Hmmm.” She taps her chin with a minuscule finger. “Maybe we can rig up something so I can ride on the dashboard on the way to school, without sliding off like Violet did last night? Do you have any, like, Fisher-Price toys from when you were little? I’m thinking a chair or throne or sofa or something, that would be about my size. And you could glue or tape it to your dashboard, and I could sit in it.”

“Let’s look around and see what we can find.”

Isabella and her mom gave away a lot of her little-kid toys when she started high school, but she kept a few to decorate her shelves with, and she soon finds the throne that went with the Fisher-Price castle set. She puts it in one pocket and Amber in the other, puts on her backpack, and goes down to the utility room to look for something to fasten it to the dashboard.

It looks like her options are Gorilla Glue, transparent packing tape, or duct tape. She takes the packing tape, plus a small rubber band to serve as a seatbelt, and goes out to the car; it’s still dark. She turns on the inside lights as she sets the packing tape down, then gets the throne and Amber out of her pockets.

She peels off a short bit of packing tape and makes a loop of it, sticking the bottom side to the dashboard a little to the right of the driver’s seat, and the throne to the top side.

“Wanna try it out, Amber?”

She walks over to it and eyes it critically. “There’s a little bit of the tape sticking out in front of the seat – I’ll need to be careful not to get stuck. But I guess you can extract me if so.” She carefully sits down, avoiding touching the tape with her feet. “Yeah, this is fine. I don’t think it’d be comfy if I were a tiny organic person, with the hard plastic, but it’s fine for me as I am now. Great job, Isabella!”

“Thanks. I try my best.”

The sun is starting to light up the horizon by the time she gets the rubber band around Amber and the throne back in a comfortable way. She decides to go on and head to school, though it’s a few minutes earlier than she usually leaves.

“I wonder how Violet, Sophia, and Bianca are doing?” she says as she starts the car.

Meanwhile, at the Ramseys’ House

“Time to clip onto the charm bracelet!” Sophia announces as she pulls on her T-shirt. She just came back to her room after a shower. “You want to clip yourself on, or have me do it?” The bracelet is sitting on her dresser, where Bianca has set Violet so she has a great view of her girlfriend getting dressed.

“I like the sound of being clipped on.”

“Prepare to be clipped!” Sophia says in an ominous voice.

“Four out of ten, was not intimidated,” Bianca teases.

Sophia gives her the raspberry as she picks Violet up, clipping her to the charm bracelet next to an Erlenmeyer flask charm, and then puts it on. “Let’s go! Bianca, you packed my bag while I was in the shower, right?”

“Like I do every time,” she says patiently.

“Belt and suspenders!” Sophia proclaims, and slinging her backpack on, walks out the door.

Violet dangles from her wrist as she says bye to her parents, who are having a late breakfast – Sophia told her at some point that they both work from home. Once she sits down in her car, Violet’s view is somewhat curtailed; with Sophia’s hands on the steering wheel, she can sometimes see out the driver’s side window, but can’t see over the dashboard. Her clip allows her to rotate freely, though the charms on either side of her, the Erlenmeyer flask and the TARDIS, limit that freedom to some extent.

“This is so fun!” she exclaims.

“Glad you’re having fun! Just relax and dangle there, and don’t say anything when a teacher is around, okay?”

“Of course.”

Sophia gets out of her car at school and walks across the student parking lot to the back door, then to her homeroom. Violet doesn’t know any of the other kids here, but Sophia chats with a couple of other girls –

one of them's vanned into a catgirl – until the intercom crackles with static and the assistant principal makes some tedious announcements. Violet listens and dangles there, wondering how Isabella and Amber are doing.

Meanwhile

Once Isabella gets to school, she picks up Amber from her throne and plops her in her dress's pocket, prompting her to giggle, then grabs her backpack and heads into the school. She's early, with not many people in homeroom yet; her homeroom teacher is blearily sipping her coffee, and Brooke is there, looking tired, but Naomi isn't there yet.

"Hey, Isabella," Brooke says. "Naomi told me about your Venn shenanigans yesterday. I wish I could have joined you, but I had family stuff going on."

"Maybe next time, then."

"Yeah, hopefully we'll be able to hang out next weekend. Does your new body have any cool features? I can tell you're a little different, although most people would just notice the different-colored hair."

Isabella pops open her forearm and calf compartments and shows Brooke the school supplies she's got in them.

"Oooh, neat!" she says. "That's useful. If you didn't have textbooks to haul around, you wouldn't need a bag or purse at all."

"Yeah. Something to revise later."

"Plus her dress has pockets!" Amber whispers, peeking out of her pocket. With Isabella and Brooke bending their heads together, it's unlikely the homeroom teacher can see her, and she looks like she's about to doze off anyway.

Brooke stares at Amber as she peeks out of Isabella's pocket. "Oh, hi!" she whispers. "I'm Brooke. What's your name?"

"This is Amber and she is part of Sophia, my girlfriend."

"Awesome!" Brooke says quietly. "Part of?"

"Amber, wanna explain?"

Amber tells Brooke the basics of how splitting works and refers her to Lauren's YouTube channel for the deets.

"Well, we should probably tuck Amber away before she gets noticed," Isabella says. Amber lets go of the hem of her pocket and falls deeper inside. "Now to just get through the day."

At lunch, Isabella gets her tray and sits down with Sophia, Julianna and Hadley. She can see her tiny Violet self dangling from Sophia's charm bracelet. Amber peeks out of her dress pocket. "Can I come out and play now?" she begs adorably.

"Yes, you may, Amber."

Isabella gingerly plucks her out of her pocket and sets her on the table beside her tray. Julianna and Hadley coo over her, and Sophia asks Violet, "Do you want to get unclipped and play with Amber?"

"Sure, that sounds like fun!"

Sophia unclips Violet from the charm bracelet and sets her down not far from Amber. "Food fight!" Amber cries, hurling a minuscule handful of Sophia's mashed potatoes in Violet's general direction. It doesn't get very far, although proportionally farther than she could throw a proportional amount in her full-size body.

"So cute!" Isabella exclaims.

"They're just illegally smol," Hadley agrees.

“Seems pretty legal to me,” Isabella says, watching their food fight escalate.

“That kind of weapons-grade cuteness is regulated by the Geneva Convention, don’t you know?” Julianna says.

“Am ded,” Hadley agrees. Sophia giggles and kisses Isabella.

“Our big selves have a good idea,” Violet says, and Amber agrees. They kiss and snuggle for a while, oblivious to the giants around them squeeing over how adorable they are.

Near the end of lunch, Sophia says, “This weekend was fun, but I’d like to go on more of a real date. Just the two of us without other friends along.”

Amber pipes up, “We wanna come too!”

“I think you are missing the point, Amber. A date that has just two people.”

“Fine!” she huffs. “We’ll go on our own date, won’t we, Violet?”

“Yeah, and it will be so much better than theirs!”

Isabella and Sophia discuss possible date locations and formats for a couple of more minutes while they bus their trays, but don’t decide anything definite just yet. Sophia gives Isabella another kiss before they head off to their next classes.

Chapter Fourteen

A few weeks later

Isabella’s birthday falls on a Sunday, and as Sophia, Naomi and Hadley’s families go to church on Sunday mornings, she’s scheduled her party for the afternoon. She and her parents are set up and waiting at the café near the Venn machine in downtown Brocksboro.

Brooke is the first one to arrive. She’s vennen into a ferret-girl form, and looks very eager to party and a little embarrassed to be the first one there.

“Hey, Brooke. Thanks so much for coming.”

“Hey! I hope I’m not too early! Where should I put this thing?” She holds up an inexpertly-wrapped rectangle.

“Let’s put it over here,” Isabella says, pointing to one of the three tables they’ve reserved. She chats with Brooke for a few minutes until Julianna arrives. Then Hadley arrives not long after that, followed by Sophia, Lauren, and Naomi.

When everybody’s been served their food and drinks, the ones who are made out of meat settle down to eat, and Isabella opens her presents while they’re eating. Sophia gives her a silver necklace and a set of three handwritten “Venn me into absolutely anything for eight hours” coupons, while her parents and her other friends give her books and Blu-Rays.

Then they pack up her gifts in her mom’s car, except for the necklace, and her parents drive home while Isabella and her friends walk over to the library.

“So what do we want to do first, girls?”

Lauren says, “What about if we all venn into small forms that can fly, and zoom around playing tag or something? If you’ve never flown before, it might take you a little while to get the hang of it, but it’s a lot of fun. And don’t worry about falling when you’re practicing; if you’re just a few inches tall, it won’t hurt much, especially if you practice over grass or leaf mulch.”

“Oooh, I love that idea.”

There are two couples in line ahead of the partygoers, a white guy and girl with catlike features and two women with silvery reflective bodies, possibly animate statues or dolls? They don’t have long to wait before

the machine opens up and two little kids come out, running over to their friend who's sitting on the benches. "Oh, you two are adorable!" she squees. The catfolk go in and take hardly any time to change back into regular humans, and the silvery women change into human women, one black and in her mid-twenties, one white and a few years older. Then it's the party group's turn.

"Let's see... How about if Sophia and I will go in together, and the rest of you can pair up as you want?" Isabella suggests, and everyone seems cool with that.

"What do you want your tiny body to be like?" Sophia asks as they enter the machine. "You probably don't just want to turn into a passerine bird; since you don't have experience with animal bodies, you might get overcome by instincts and wander off to eat worms, and there's your birthday ruined. Time enough to try that this summer, if you want. As for me, you can venn me into anything small enough to fly, with any kind of wings that will support that body."

"Hmmm. Can you make me like a fairy?"

"Of course! Let's see..." Sophia starts muttering and selecting images.

Isabella decides to turn Sophia into a fairy as well; she likes the idea of them matching. "Tinkerbell," she says, and gets a lot of versions of Sophia wearing bells on her neck, wrists or ankles, or simply changed into a bell or set of bells, often with hammers or bars of metal to ring them with, separate or connected in a Swiss Army knife sort of arrangement. She groans and describes Tinkerbell as a very small woman with blonde hair in a bun, a short green dress, and dragonfly-like wings that can enable her to fly.

She gets a set of images that distantly resemble Tinkerbell. Many of them have insectoid features other than the wings, and although most have blonde hair or some kind of yellowish bee fuzz, not many have it in a bun.

She picks through the images for one without an insectoid face or limbs, and finds one that looks pretty good. Her hair is closer to Sophia's usual light brown than Tinkerbell's blonde, and it's in more of a beehive than a bun, but she's wearing a dress similar to Tinkerbell's in a peachy-pink color.

"Ready," she calls out.

"All right," Sophia says. "I'm ready with yours, too. I hope you like it. One, two, three!" She slaps her green button, and just as Isabella is about to hit hers, she finds herself tiny, dwarfed by the enormous booth.

"Hurry, run over to the screen and press your green button!" Sophia calls out. The interface has rearranged itself so the green and red buttons are down near the floor, but it's about twenty feet away from Isabella's new perspective.

Her skin is bone-white with strange patterns of black lines and circles on it, with now and then a small splash of red. She's wearing a fur bikini, maybe from a mouse or squirrel, and carrying a spear carved from the bone of a small furry woodland animal. Huge butterfly-like wings sprout from her shoulders, dwarfing the rest of her body even when folded in. "Wow!" Isabella marvels, twisting her head to get a better look at her wings.

"C'mon, press your button! Don't try to fly just yet, just run!"

"Right," Isabella says, sprinting toward the buttons. The moment she hits the green button, the doors open. A gigantic ferret-woman and an even more gigantic dragon-girl gaze down on her, and the ferret-woman squees "Awwww!"

Isabella smiles and waves, unsure what to say.

"Hmm, dragonfly wings," Sophia says, twisting her head to the side. "Let's see..." She flutters them tentatively, then faster, and takes off, veering erratically from side to side and up and down, and then plops to the ground. "Oof. Gonna need some practice."

"You want me to set you two over on the grass while me and Lauren go next?" Brooke asks.

"Sounds like a good idea," Isabella says. Brooke carefully picks her up with one hand and Sophia with the other, and carries them over to the grass next to the bench, while Lauren sets up the machine for herself and Brooke.

“Let’s try that again,” Sophia says, and starts fluttering her wings.

Isabella also attempts to move her wings. She finds she can’t flutter them as fast as Sophia’s doing, but since they’re a lot bigger, she doesn’t need to. Just one flap and she feels a noticeable pressure pushing her forward, and has to shift her feet to stay standing.

She flaps her wings as fast as she can, which seems to be several times a second, and finds herself lifting off. Her course is erratic, though, and she isn’t sure yet how to control what direction she flies in. She remembers seeing butterflies fluttering around the botanical garden in Chicago, and how they rarely seemed to fly in a straight line or smoothly-curved course like birds often do.

After a few minutes, she starts to get the basics of how she can flap harder with one wing than the other or shift her arms and legs to steer. Her flight paths are still pretty erratic, though. Sophia is able to fly straighter with her dragonfly wings, after a few tumbles. By the time Isabella and Sophia are flying more or less steadily, Lauren and Brooke come out of the machine. Lauren looks mostly the same, just a lot smaller and with proportionally bigger wings. Brooke looks kind of like a tiny harpy, with birdlike wings and feet and a human head, arms and torso, except that she’s got eyes all over her naked, sexless body, including where her mouth should be.

“You two look fun,” Isabella says.

“She wanted a Biblically accurate angel,” Lauren says. “That was the closest I could get.” Brooke offers a thumbs-up.

Lauren takes off and joins Isabella and Sophia in flying around above the grass and shrubbery in front of the library. Obviously she’s had practice flying in that body or a similar one. Brooke faceplants a few times before she gets the hang of it.

“This is amazing!” Isabella exclaims, zipping around after Sophia.

“It’s more fun with my beautiful girlfriend with me,” Sophia says. She tries to hover next to Isabella and kiss her, but Isabella’s erratic flight causes her to miss.

Then Hadley and Julianna come out of the machine. Julianna is a little fembot with a large quadcopter hat. Hadley is a bat, with only slight concessions to humanoidness and daylight adaptation.

“You two look really cute,” Isabella says.

But Julianna is also big Julianna, with a few tweaks – she’s split, and her big self has a long tail and bare feet that look kind of like hands. Juliannabot and Hadleybat fly over to join them, while Gigantianna goes in the machine with Naomi.

Isabella tries to focus on hovering in place. It doesn’t seem to come easy. She manages to wobble around within a few inches of the same position, but can’t quickly figure out how to stay in place steadily. “We’ll watch some butterfly videos and see how they do it,” Sophia suggests.

Juliannabot challenges the rest of them to a race to the park a couple of blocks south. “After Naomi finishes getting vanned,” she says. “Let’s land on top of the Venn machine and start the race from there.”

“Sounds like a plan, then,” Isabella says.

They all land on top of the Venn machine and several of them walk over to peek over the edge, waiting for Naomi and big!Julianna to come out. It takes them a couple of minutes. The guys waiting for the machine are looking up at them, and talking about maybe venning into little winged critters. “That looks like so much fun,” one of them says.

Finally the doors open, and big!Julianna comes out unchanged, while a small round creature toddles out of the other booth, buzzing its stubby wings and hopping a short distance and then landing again. Julianna bends down and scoops her up, then looks around. “Where did y’all go?” she calls out as the guys who’d been waiting set up the machine and go in.

“Up here, Juliana,” Isabella calls out, and several of the others (including Juliannabot) do much the same.

“Oh.” Big Julianna jumps and scrambles up onto the top of the machine, and sets Naomi down next to the others.

She’s very round, and covered in fuzz, with round stubby wings. Her four arms and two legs are proportionally thicker than an insect’s, but thinner than a human’s, and her face is mostly human but with compound eyes. “Hey, girls! Bets on whether I can fly? Scientists say bumblebees can’t, you know, but that doesn’t stop them.”

Sophia shakes her head. “That’s a misconception. Back in like the 1930s or so somebody tried to model bee flight using then-current aerodynamics and couldn’t figure out how they did it, but that was an oversimplified model and we know more about both aerodynamics and bee biology now. I do think it might take you longer to get the hang of flying than some of us, though, unless you’ve done it before?”

“I’ve been in small flying bodies before, but no, I haven’t been a bee-girl before,” Naomi replies.

“Let’s give Naomi a few minutes to practice, and then start,” Juliannabot asks.

Naomi buzzes her wings and hops several times before finally taking off and zooming around erratically. “Start what?”

“We are gonna have a race,” Isabella explains.

Juliannabot adds, “I challenged them to a race. From here to the south edge of the park.”

“Oh. I don’t think it’s gonna be remotely even, but it sounds like fun!” Naomi says. She doesn’t take anywhere near as long to get the hang of flying in her bee-girl form as Isabella or Hadley did.

“I’ll tell you when to start,” big Julianna says. “On your marks.” They all hurry over to stand along the edge of the Venn machine. “Get set. . . Go!”

Isabella takes off, going as fast and straight as she can manage. As Naomi said, it’s a very uneven race. Julianna, Sophia and Hadley are soon far ahead of Brooke and Lauren, and those two are a fair distance ahead of Isabella and Naomi. But everyone is laughing and seems to be having fun. Isabella and Naomi straggle into the park after Julianna and the other front-runners have stopped to rest on the branches of a big red oak; they cheer the stragglers on as they flutter and bumble across the small park and join them.

“That was certainly fun,” Isabella says.

“Yeah! We should do it again sometime with more similar bodies with the same type of wings, so it’s more of a fair competition,” Hadley says.

“Sounds like a good plan.”

“Y’all want to fly around some more?” Sophia asks. “We could keep going south into my neighborhood, maybe as far as my house and back?”

Isabella and her other guests agree, so soon the seven of them flutter, buzz, and swoop along over a church and a number of houses until they reach what Sophia says is her house. It isn’t until they fly a bit lower that Isabella can recognize it, never having seen it from above before. They settle on the branches of a tree in the front yard and chat for a while.

“Oh, I thought of something fun,” Sophia says with a mischievous grin. “Mrs. Higgins next door has a birdfeeder, and she sits and watches the birds a lot, especially on Saturday. We should pay her a visit.”

“Are you sure we won’t get in trouble?” Hadley asks.

Sophia shrugs. “Nothing serious, if at all. She’s cool, she’ll laugh it off once she gets over being gobsmacked.”

“Then let’s do it,” Isabella says. “Let’s go all at once. In case there are birds, we want to have numbers on our side.”

“Sounds good,” Julianna says, and Brooke nods and gives a thumbs up.

They take off and follow Sophia's lead, over the Ramseys' roof and the neighboring house's roof, where they alight again, looking down into the yard, where a pair of birdfeeders, one with suet and one with seeds, hang from poles erected next to a couple of birdbaths. There are half a dozen birds on and near the feeders and baths, a couple of finches, a female cardinal, two robins, and another one with varied colors fading into each other on their back and a bright splash of yellow at the end of their tail that Isabella doesn't recognize.

"Look at all those birds," Isabella remarks.

"Yeah," Sophia says, hovering over the roof. "The birds have had years to learn where the feeder and baths are. On my mark – three, two, one, go!"

All seven of them zoom toward the birdfeeders. The birds scatter.

"Guess the birds got scared of us," Isabella says.

"Mainly Julianna's whirling blades," Sophia says. "By ourselves, we'd probably look like a snack."

"Fear the blades!" Juliannabot proclaims.

"I guess that's good for the rest of us," Isabella says. "Oh, and I had an idea for what we could do next. What if we did a little competition where we pair up to make matching venns, and try to make the most creative paired forms?"

"Sounds good," Julianna says, and Brooke gives a double thumbs up.

"Except there's seven of us, so one of the groups will have to be three," Naomi says.

"One of us can pair with my big self," Julianna says.

"Except Juliannabot can't go in the machine without merging with her big self," Lauren points out.

"Oh, right. Been too long since I split, I'd forgotten about that," Julianna says with a frown.

"Well, maybe the two Julianas can be the judges, then?" Isabella suggests.

They fly off north toward the library, and soon settle on the ground behind the people waiting in line, who stare at them for a few moments before returning to their conversation.

"Where's my big self gotten to?" Julianna asks.

"Up here," says a voice from overhead. They look up and see Juliana lounging on a limb of the oak that overhangs the Venn machine.

"How did you get up there?" Isabella asks.

In answer, she climbs back down, and Isabella can see that her hand-like feet and tail make climbing a lot easier for her than for a baseline human. They tell her about their idea for a paired venning creativity competition, and she agrees to be a judge.

"I guess your little squirts are gonna need me to set up the machine for you?" she teases.

"Nah," Juliannabot boasts. "Several of us can hover, so we can do that ourselves."

"Alright, let's pair up. Obviously I want to be with Sophia," Isabella says.

Hadley and Lauren pair up, and Naomi and Brooke. When it's Isabella and Sophia's turn, Juliannabot hovers by the interface and sets up the machine, and they go in, finding the interface buttons and image bubbles clustered near the floor where they can reach them.

"All right," Sophia asks, "what's our strategy?"

"Hmm. Well, we want to coordinate, but do we want to do matching forms, or trying to synergize?"

"So I had a couple of ideas based on your chest cabinet in your main body. What if one of us has a transparent container in our chest? Like a terrarium or a birdcage? I was thinking of maybe having the whole body be an open latticework, if we go with a bird cage, with a big open space in the chest and a door where you can

let a parrot or mynah bird – something that can talk – in and out. You got any preference about which of us is the cage and which is the bird? Or bird-girl?”

“I like the idea of being the cage. I can have you inside me.”

“All right. Let’s get to work.”

“Phoenix-like human girl, about five or six inches high,” Isabella says, and gets a lot of images of girls with more or fewer bird features. Most have feathers instead of head hair, many are covered with feathers all over; some wear clothes, but many are naked, especially the more birdlike ones. Almost all have wings, about half have birdlike legs and feet, and less than half have mammalian breasts. Most of them have flame-colored feathers, red, orange, and yellow with a spot of blue or white here and there, but none appear to actually be on fire.

One of them is a round little ball like a chickadee, with a semi-human face.

“Ooo, this one is so cute,” Isabella murmurs, and selects that one.

A minute or so later, Sophia says, “Okay, I’m ready when you are.”

“Alright. Let’s begin.”

Sophia presses her green button, and Isabella presses hers. She looks down and finds that her body is shaped like a naked woman – though without fine anatomical details – but made of a wire frame or latticework, kind of like certain styles of dressmaker dummy. There’s a latched door in her belly.

Sophia leaves her booth in little short hops. “Is this the closest you could get to a mynah bird?” she asks sardonically.

“Awww!” Naomi squees. Lauren looks uncomfortable. “I’m not seeing the theme,” Julianna says.

“You okay, Lauren?”

“Yeah, it’s just. . . I don’t wanna yuck your yum, but the human face on the bird body is a little creepy to me.”

“Can we maybe change that, then? I was unsure about the human face thing myself.”

“All right,” big Julianna says after consulting with her little self. “We’ll let you re-venn Sophia with no penalty, but she can’t modify you.”

So they go back inside. “Let’s make you another type of bird, but still able to talk,” Isabella says. Dozens of birds of all kinds of species appear in the interface bubbles.

“Yeah, that’s why I suggested a parrot or mynah bird,” Sophia says.

“Mynah bird,” Isabella says, and several species and subspecies of mynah bird and related birds appear on the screen. She picks one that has blue-black feathers over most of its body, with a patch of yellow feathers around its eyes and a reddish-orange beak, and presses her green button. Sophia tests her voice as she waits for her green button to time out and the doors to open. “La la la la!” she squawks.

“Beautiful!” Isabella says.

As they emerge, Julianna asks again, “So what’s your theme, you two?”

Isabella opens up her chest-cage, and Sophia flutters up and into it, alighting on a crossbar. “Sophia want a cracker,” she says deadpan.

“Isn’t that supposed to be parrots?” Naomi asks.

“Sophia want some naan,” Sophia corrects herself.

“What do you think?” Isabella asks.

Juliannabot and tail!Julianna confer in whispers. “Okay,” Juliannabot says, “we’re giving you nine points for synergy, eight points for aesthetics and five points for performance.”

“Since when are those the categories we’re being judged on?” Hadley asks.

“Since now.”

Lauren and Hadley confer quietly for a minute, then go into the machine. When the doors open, Lauren is a little quadrupedal dragon about eight inches long. She’s wearing a saddle, bit and reins. Hadley is even smaller, still mostly human but with some foxlike features, just the right size to fit Lauren’s saddle.

“That’s a fun idea you have there,” Isabella says.

Lauren squeaks joyfully as Hadley mounts her saddle and straps into a safety harness that Isabella didn’t notice at first, then takes off and flies around, doing loops and barrel rolls. Hadley screams with excitement like someone who’s ridden a rollercoaster just often enough to get over the fear and enjoy it.

“Seven points for synergy, nine points for aesthetics, and seven points for performance,” tail! Julianna says after talking it over with her little bot self.

Now it’s Naomi and Brooke’s turn. After a few minutes, the doors open and a possum trots out of Naomi’s booth. She goes over to Brooke’s booth and five baby possums scramble onto her back.

“Awww!” Isabella, Hadley, and both Juliannas squee.

The mama possum trots over among them, then seems to suddenly notice the giant people around her, and rolls over, playing dead; her babies imitate her.

The big and small Juliannas confer in whispers.

“So who is the winner of this little contest?” Isabella asks.

Big Julianna turns to her and says, “Naomi and Brooke get eight points for synergy, six for aesthetics, and seven for performance. And that puts Hadley and Lauren in first place at twenty-three points, Isabella and Sophia second at twenty-two, and Naomi and Brooke third at twenty-one.”

The mama possum screeches. The smol dragon squeaks happily and the tiny fox girl goes “Yip!” The mynah bird in Isabella’s chest squawks, “We’re number two!”

“Yay!” Isabella cheers.

“So,” Sophia squawks, “do we want to stay in these forms for a while or what?”

“I wanna maybe try something else for the rest of the day,” Isabella says. “Something more normal, relatively at least.”

Hadley agrees, and Lauren squeaks affirmatively (Isabella isn’t sure how she can tell, but it does seem clear). Naomi nods. “You’re the biggest of us, so you or big Julianna will need to set up the machine,” Hadley says.

Naomi and Brooke quickly change each other into their usual schoolday forms, then Lauren and Hadley take a bit longer; Lauren comes out as a dragon-girl with teal and light green feathers, while Hadley is back to her schoolday form. Now it’s Isabella and Sophia’s turn.

“Shall we?” Isabella says as she lets Sophia out of the cage.

“Are you ready to go back to your usual mannequin body?” Sophia asks as she flutters into the machine.

“Well. . .” Isabella pauses for a moment as the doors close behind them, scared to ask for what she wants. Sophia waits patiently. “I was wondering if you can venn me into a normal human girl body. And that tonight we could enjoy each other in the traditional way. No complex venn changes.

“Where, though? Not at my house. Would your parents be an issue if we went to your house? Or do we want to park somewhere secluded?”

“I think my parents would be okay with it. They are pretty open about this stuff.”

“All right. What do you want your human body to look like?”

“Use my mannequin body as a base, but then I want you to choose what you think looks the best for me.”

“All right. As for me, look for the paired forms in my history, the human Sophia and doll Bianca.”

Isabella soon has the right pair of bodies selected, and waits a couple of minutes until Sophia says she’s ready. Isabella grins in anticipation. They both press their green buttons – Sophia pecks the screen with her beak.

Isabella is breathing and feeling her heart beat for the first time in weeks. Long, straight black hair dangles around her shoulders. She’s about as tall as Sophia, maybe half an inch shorter.

Isabella braces for feeling wrong, but it never comes.

“How are you feeling?” Sophia asks.

“This feels right.”

Sophia smiles broadly. “Let me get my phone and tell Mom and Dad I’ll be out late.”

After Isabella and Sophia leave the machine, big Julianna goes in with Hadley, and Hadley venns her into her schoolday body. The little quadcopter-hat-bot remains separate.

Isabella and her party guests walk around downtown for a while together, shopping and window-shopping, and gradually make their way back to the side-street by the café where they parked. Everyone says goodbye and happy birthday again, and hugs Isabella. Then she and Sophia get into Isabella’s car and she drives them home.

“I’m so excited for tonight,” Isabella says, glancing at her girlfriend before turning her attention back to the road.

“Me too,” Sophia says.

As they arrive at Isabella’s house, she feels excitement shoot through her veins. Or maybe it’s adrenaline. It’s been long enough since she had a flesh body that she’s not sure how to handle this.

They go up the porch steps hand in hand and unlock the door. Isabella’s parents are watching a movie in the living room. “Hey,” Isabella says. “Sophia and I are going to hang out in my room.”

“Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Saylor,” Sophia says.

“Nice to see you again, Sophia,” Isabella’s mom says. “Bella, you look really nice as a... I don’t want to say ‘real’ girl – maybe flesh and blood girl?”

“Yeah, that’s cool.”

“Are you going to stay in that body or change back to the animate doll again soon?”

“I’m not sure. Probably the doll for now, but I wanted to at least try this out.”

“Well, just let us know if you want us to help with the paperwork,” her dad says. “I’d rather not have to do that super often, but I understand you’re trying different bodies and maybe don’t know yet which you want to stick with.”

“Of course.”

Isabella and Sophia go upstairs and into her bedroom, closing the door behind them, and sit down on the bed. Sophia gives Isabella a kiss. “How do you want to do this?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Isabella says, her face feeling hot. “I didn’t think that far ahead.”

“Maybe we should take it slow and decide at each step whether we want to go further. Is that okay?”

“Okay, sounds good to me.”

“Is it okay if I touch your boobs?”

“I’d love that.”

Later, relaxing and looking at her drowsy girlfriend, Isabella finds her mind full of slow, happy thoughts. She's happy to be with Sophia, happy to be a girl... and more than a little annoyed that she has to get out of this comfortable bed, away from her comfortable girlfriend, and go empty her bladder.

Meat bodies are okay for a special occasion, she decides on her way back from the bathroom, but she likes her puzzle-box body best.

About the Authors

Trismegistus Shandy (they/them) is the author of more than a hundred stories of various lengths, totaling more than two million words; they've been writing since childhood and posting stories online since 2007. Their previous ebooks can be found at:

- <https://trismegistus-shandy.itch.io/>
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- <http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B00I14IWV6>

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- <https://www.scribblehub.com/profile/1013/trismegistusshandy/>
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- <http://www.tgstorytime.com/viewuser.php?uid=8445>
- <http://bigclosetr.us/topshelf/trismegistus-shandy>
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- <http://www.fictionmania.tv/searchdisplay/authordisplay.html?word=4122>
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Scribblehub is currently the best place to follow their new work, and fluff4me will be once it's out of beta, but the other sites have some older stories that haven't been reposted to Scribblehub or fluff4me. Caveat: some of those older stories are somewhat gender essentialist or otherwise unreflectingly use problematic tropes.

Skylar (she/her) is the author of a number of stories and captions that can be found on DeviantArt.

- <https://www.deviantart.com/styn246/gallery>

Colophon

The original roleplay chat was over Discord. Google Docs was used to edit the chat log into a novel. The ebook was created with Emacs, custom Perl scripts, GNU `make`, and Pandoc.