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Stephen Coghlan's

EMILY'S FLIGHT

She hid her face in her hands and blocked herself from her mirror's reflection. Yet even with her eyes obstructed, Emily still sensed the space about her through her skin, through the smells, and the taste of the air on her bifurcated tongue.

With a sigh, she replaced her brush to its rightful spot on her vanity. No matter how often she combed her hair, or adjusted the frills around her neck, or tried to hide her scales with makeup, she could not disguise the fact that she was not 100% human.

She didn't always mind being different, and sometimes, she was proud of her abilities, but other times she resented the fact that she was so unique, and that she was unable to fit in naturally with anyone that she knew, because Emily was the only lizard / reptile / human hybrid in existence.

Revulsion built within her, and she stood from her vanity counter with a hiss of indignation. Her closet door was opened. Although she rarely wore clothes, Emily did own a few garments that either helped to fight off the harshness of winter, or were traditional garb of her adopted peoples, but it wasn't either of those that she was interested in.

She removed a simple cardboard box. Inside was a blue dress, lovingly folded. Her foster sister had worn it once, decided the color did not do her well, and had planned to give away.

When Emily had asked for the garment, Nadie has been surprised, but had been more than willing to let her sister have it.

With reverence, Emily slipped the dress over her head. Her skin changed from its natural green, into the deeply tanned tone of her siblings. A small inhale of air, a brief warping of muscles, and she studied her, decidedly female, form's reflection.

She hated what stared back at her. The legs were lean and powerful, and the image's waist was petite, and the chest, ample enough. The reflection's hair shone in the light, and danced about its shoulders, but the eyes were too far apart, and the frills about the neck, the spikes along the flat tail, the claws at the ends of the fingers, and the fangs that occupied the mouth, destroyed the illusion.

It took all of her restraint not to tear the delicate fabric from her body, but Emily let out some of her frustrations when she tossed the dress onto her bed. As she watched the material meld with the sheets, her eyes caught on a picture that made her feel guilty for trying to be human.

It sat on her nightstand. It was a photograph, taken years ago. In it, Emily was surrounded by the other thirteen hybrids that she called her siblings. Her younger self was cuddled up against a canine brother for warmth, to stave off the bitter October chill.

Emily and the others had been created by bonding humans with animals, in a successful attempt to give them abilities and powers. Each one of them were unique, each of them called themselves Genmos, or Genetically Modified Species.

With a moan, she fell on top of her bed and crossed her arms over her head.

She felt horribly confused. She was proud of who and what she was, but at the same time, she had not seen the others like her in over half of her life, and, like any young woman, her thoughts had turned from childhood fancies as her body developed and her mind shifted.

At the last gathering of her adopted peoples, the Abenaki, she had noticed a few of the boys her age as more than just, acquaintances.

When she had first been introduced to the tribes by her foster family, she had been mocked and ridiculed, and her tail had been pulled so hard by the other children, that she had dropped it. It had taken weeks to grow back. Some of the elders had whispered about her, and more than once she had been called Atosis, or Athussos, or, Gitaskog. All of the names were related to a horned serpent of old that used to force humans to find sticks so that the monster could skewer them, and then consume their flesh.

Emily had hated the way that she was treated, but not all were mean, and many treated her with respect, and eventually, friendship. Over time those that mocked her were won over, and she even began to appreciate the role she was given, when she took on the beast's part in ceremonies and plays. Her enhanced strength and endurance was also coveted when it came time to play lacrosse or enter into competitions of a physical nature.

Just last weekend, there had been a small get-together. Although Emily normally didn't get out of the house, she always joined her foster family when they went out of town. While out at the gathering, one of her childhood friends had caught her eyes in a different way. When Keme smiled at her, Emily's heart had skipped a beat, and when they had hugged hello, she had struggled to keep her skin from turning pink, and she had noticed the strength of his arms, and his smell, although musky, was entirely enticing. She hoped that he had noticed her attentions.

Their families were going hunting together on the weekend, and Emily couldn't wait. She loved going up north, loved the fact that she could run around freely in the woods, without fear of being seen by outsiders, loved the thrill of stalking prey, and although she had never shot at anything bigger than a hare, she had helped flush moose and deer into the waiting sights of her companions.

It was the one time she could really be herself.

"Supper's ready!" Her foster mother's voice called.

The thought of a hot meal helped to sooth Emily's frazzled nerves. Tucking the dress under her bed's blankets, she stepped into the main hall. The condo she spent most of her time in was a simple structure, a leftover from prohibition days. It was four floors tall, and each quarter of each level was divided into a four bedroom unit with a single washroom and shower, a kitchen, and a main area. Old, cast iron radiators still ticked against the walls, and an ancient fire escape still warped the view outside the windows.

It was archaic on purpose. The pride of Quebec City's 400 year rich history was evident, and infectious.

The smells coming from the kitchen were both sweet and savory, which meant that her foster brother, François, who was studying culinary arts, was responsible for the meal.

Taking her seat at the table, Emily noticed that it was only set for four. Nadie was out at rehearsals again. Emily knew she should be proud of her sister, but it rubbed her the wrong way. It was another play that Nadie would perform in that Emily would never see live.

Her father's voice came from the master bedroom. His language was short and profane.

“What’s today’s experiment?” Emily asked in French as her brother and mother emerged from the kitchen.

“Maple glazed back-bacon, caramelized poutine, and whiskey softened brown beans.” François announced proudly as he set a plate before his sister.

Their mother rolled her eyes. “My God, if it was any more Canadianized, it would apologize for being here.”

Emily’s much-needed laugh was cut short when their father emerged from the master bedroom. He was flushed and visibly upset. When he took a seat, he placed a collection of metal on the center of the table. They were the keys to the gun cabinet.

“What is it?” Emily asked.

At first her father did not respond, but when he spoke his voice was quiet and slow, as if he thought of every word before he spoke. It was just his way of controlling his temper, but it made it seem as if he had trouble with the language.

“I was called by the elders.” He answered, looking at his foster daughter directly. “The dances were filmed, and one of our youths posted it to YouTube. It’s been taken down, but the internet never forgets.”

Looking up from his plate, François wiped a string of melted cheese from his chin. “Just the dance?”

“Emily’s dance.”

The quiet was palpable. The recording of traditional dances had always been restricted, but in order to protect Emily, and her adopted tribe, an all-out ban had been enacted.

The mood was soured. Emily tried to eat, but the food was, for once, too salty on her tongue. She ate without delight, and just as she swallowed her last morsel, there was a rattle at the front door. It was too early for Nadie to be home. Together, father and son rose to challenge whoever was forcing their way inside.

The door opened, and for a moment, the super's face was visible. The look of regret was plainly evident for all to see.

And then the bad men entered the room.

The troops were dressed in heavy armor, and wielded automatic weapons, which they levelled at the father and son, who themselves, raced forward in order to protect Emily from her pursuers. With a cry, her mother grabbed Emily and dragged her into the master bedroom. Slamming the door, the two tipped an armoire across the entryway.

"The window!" Emily's mother ordered. Without waiting, the Genmos ran for the glass.

The door thumped as something solid rammed into it. The blow knocked Emily's mother to the ground, before bullets pocketed the door and smashed through the room.

Emily did not wait, but curled herself into a ball and flung herself through the cracking view to outside. She landed on the fire escaped among shards of ceramics. Yells from below warned her that other pursuers were waiting at the ground.

There was only one direction to go.

Planting her hands against the brick, Emily felt her palms suction themselves to the rough surface, and she began to climb. As she made her way rapidly up the wall, her skin altered hue, until it resembled the building that she scaled.

There was another loud crash, and her mother screamed, and then one of her pursuers stepped onto the fire escape and searched for his prey.

Curling her tongue about her fangs, Emily blew forcefully, and venom flew in a stream that landed all over her opponent's face. Goggles protected his eyes, and a helmet, his skull, but the rest of his head was only shielded by a thin balaclava, and where the poisons worked their way through, the flesh burned.

With a cry of agony, her pursuer fell and ripped his mask from his face.

Not caring to stick around, Emily finished her ascent. On the roof, she had a better view of how much trouble she was in. They had the building surrounded.

Cursing, Emily ran to the opposite edge of the building and leapt out over thin air. As she fell, she spread her arms and legs, and flaps of skin opened, caught the air, and slowed her vertical descent while it maximized her jump's distance. She soared over the street, and smashed into a window of another old building. Unlike the one she called home, the structure she entered was in dire need of repair, and had been deemed too dangerous for occupancy.

Running, Emily entered the main hallway and continued all the way to the end. There was no window, but a staircase led upwards. Taking them three at a time, the lizard Genmos hurried all the way to the top.

She regretted stepping onto the flat roof. A helicopter was landing, and more troops were pouring forth from the vehicle.

With a curse, Emily slammed the door and descended onto the top floor. She had to hide. Tucking her shoulder, she cracked open the entryway to one of the many rooms along the hall, but she didn't enter.

There was a loose floorboard beneath her feet.

Lying flat, Emily collapsed her body, and slipped through the hole, barely disturbing the wood that she passed through.

No sooner had she pulled her tail in after her, than the sound of running footsteps exploded throughout the hall.

Emily wanted to panic, but she knew that would accomplish nothing. Instead, she slowed her breathing, calmed her heart, and began to breathe through her skin. Her temperature plummeted, until she was no warmer than the wood and cement that she lay between.

She felt her pursuers walk over her, felt them inspect the doorway she had broken, felt them murmur and question and then spread out.

It was all jumbled in her mind. She lost track of time. Everything was a confusing muddle of sounds and scents. She thought she heard someone purr, then growl. She thought she heard French and English, she heard music, and saw shapes dance in front of her eyes.

And then, it was quiet.

After a time, she sped up her heart, increased her metabolism, and squeezed her way free.

The hallway was abandoned.

Shaking dust and asbestos from her skin, the Genmos took a tentative step towards the stairwell.

Someone charged from the doorway she had broken. When the two collided, Emily's skin took on a violent hue, and poison leached from her flesh.

Her opponent's screams were symphonic to her ears.

As the agent let her go, Emily balled one hand into a fist-like club, and drove it into her opponent's chest. The force of her blow knocked him flat, but others had appeared.

She was grabbed by a woman with gloves, but Emily's claws on her finger tips punched through the woman's uniform and into her sides. Emily felt more venom leach into her foe, and the woman collapsed without a sound.

A knife was thrust at her stomach, but Emily tightened her flesh, and her scales formed an armor that the blade slashed, but did not pierce. A kick sent that opponent into others of his kind.

She took for the stairs and climbed. The helicopter sat idle, but the pilot looked her in the eyes. He did not wait, but drew a pistol.

Falling to all fours, Emily darted for the far edge of the derelict building. There was a busy street beyond that, and before anyone could stop her, she leapt off the roof and fell towards the cars below.

She landed on a truck, and stuck fast to the side. Before she willed herself invisible, Emily took one moment to wave goodbye.

Then she was lost amongst the sea of humanity.

As the cold winds buffeted her and the ground passed rapidly beneath her feet, Emily smiled to herself.

She didn't mind being so unique after all.