

SHI

Volume One:
The End Where It Begins

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– ACT ONE –

Flounder

Chapter One:

'It's going to be fine.'

Home

'It's going to be fine. Definitely. One hundred percent. Everything is going to be okay. Nobody really knows what they're doing anyway.'

Surrounded by scrunched-up notes and half-open books, Teal stared through the shutters of his bedroom window and sighed. 'Well they're sure doing a darn good job of hiding it.'

Even in the early hours of the morning, everybody seemed to have somewhere to be.

Always the first to rise, three badgers were lumbering down the road in their overalls, cracking wise as they carried large brick hods on their backs to the dig site of the day. And over by the station, silhouetted by a glorious pink sky, hedgehogs in business suits were rubbing their eyes. The smaller animals kept their distance wearily, hiding behind large newspapers as they braced themselves for the morning commute.

Even by the window, Mama Poss's children were running rampant next door, swigging sodas and making angels on the frosty grass below. Kids didn't have to worry about where

they belonged, so they could go anywhere, and do anything. They were living the dream, and they didn't even know it.

Teal sighed again. His breath misted out in front of him, fogging up the view. He placed a paw on the cold glass and watched it slowly squeak down. Droplets trickled down the windowpane.

For a moment, he caught sight of his reflection. A familiar blue face stared back at him with two yellow eyes. They narrowed, following the blue fur down to his cheeks, where his natural black markings fanned out like flames. Even after eighteen years, there were still moments where he'd catch sight of himself, and wish the fox staring back at him was red.

Holding his breath, he gazed into the glass, and blinked.

Nothing. Still as blue as a blueberry bush. He stuck his tongue out and flopped backwards onto his bed.

'Is that you, T?' Teal's father called from the hallway. 'Is that my favourite fox?' Teal buried his head in his pillow.

'No.'

'Rightio!' his father chimed. Emmett Arke had always been a morning fox. His son, by all accounts, was most certainly not. 'Well next time you see him, please tell him there's an intruder in the house, and that his dad would also like a word.'

'Will do!'

'Did you get any sleep?'

Teal groaned. 'Not a wink.'

'There is such a thing as too much studying, you know.'

Teal rolled his eyes and scooped onto his back. The early morning light streamed through the shutters, giving the room a hazy pink glow. Squinting, he made shadow puppets on the wall with his tail as his father talked. 'Don't push yourself too hard – you've got a week before you have to go back,

remember? The house won't be the same without you. So what's on the cards today? Anything exciting?'

Teal turned his head to the hundreds of pages of study notes on his bedside cabinet, and the letter of resignation that lay buried underneath.

'Oh, you know,' he shrugged, biting his lip. 'This and that. Why?'

'Just curious,' his father said cheerfully. 'Things seem a little quiet around here for a work day.'

Teal froze. His tail stood quivering in the air.

'But I don't work weekdays.'

'Who said it was a weekday?'

Teal swallowed. 'It's Friday. Today is Friday, right?'

'Try Saturday.'

Teal flung himself out of bed at once. 'Crap! Oh, crap, crap, crap, crap, crap!'

He raced around the room, frantically gathering his things together, and bumping into drawers and shelves as he tore off his pyjamas, and hopped into his uniform. Wallet? Check. Keys? Check. Phone? At this point, there were more cracks on the glass than screen, but it'd have to do.

'Time check?' he called anxiously, cursing under his breath as he dropped his phone again.

'You've got time. And I heard that! These ears aren't grey yet!'

Teal burst through the bedroom door – his father was already waiting there with his coat, bracing himself against the doorframe.

'You're the best, Dad! I don't even know why you're up,' Teal said, manoeuvring his arms through the sleeves. He moved carefully to avoid knocking against his father's leg braces. 'You don't need to be awake for another hour.'

‘You’ve been stressing yourself to death lately – I had a feeling sooner or later, you’d forget to set one of your twelve alarms. It’s no trouble.’

Teal flushed. ‘I have no idea what I did to end up with a dad like you. I don’t deserve it.’

His father chuckled. ‘No, you deserve a darn sight better. Just get there on time, so all this isn’t in vain.’

‘I will. I’d fly if I had wings,’ Teal muttered, clipping the coat cover around his tail. ‘Work’s going to be a mess. It always is. And you know what the weekend rush in the city is like. At least here, I don’t get stared at anymore. Over there—’

‘Now you hold on there for a second, T.’

Teal’s father nodded to the mirror in the hallway, where pictures of the two dotted the walls. Resigned, Teal trudged over to it and waited for his father to join him. There, they stood together, side by side. His father may have been wearing heavy metal braces around his legs, and Teal’s face may have been blue and black, instead of the usual reddish-brown and white, but all the same, the family resemblance was undeniable.

‘I didn’t decide to look like this,’ his father said, pinching a generous handful of his own cheek fluff. ‘Don’t get me wrong – no complaints from me. But it’s nothing special. I was born with the same markings as my dad, and he was born with all the same markings as his. But do you think that says anything about the kind of animals we are underneath? Show me in the red fox handbook where it says you actually have to be red.’

‘I think I left my copy at uni,’ Teal said, patting his pockets. His father chuckled. ‘But it’s more in the name, really.’

‘Psh, what’s in a name when you know full well that every

kit in school would give their left paw to light up a room like you do?’

Teal smiled dolefully. ‘You know, you’re probably right. But kids don’t know how the world works. How could they? On paper, being different is just like being special. That’s what you always said. But being different is more like being wrong. People see it and suddenly, they’re circling round like they’re all white blood cells. You don’t know what it’s like.’

‘Oh?’ His father rapped his knuckles against his braces. ‘And you think growing up with these is a walk in the park?’

Teal shook his head.

‘I mean, in a funny way, it actually was. Come rain or come shine, that bloody doctor had me doing laps of the whole darn neighbourhood to strengthen my legs. But I got my fair share of looks too. It’s jealousy, plain and simple. They’re never going to have my hardware, and they know it,’ he winked. ‘And they can scrub dye into their fur until they’re blue in the face, but they’ll still never be as blue as you. So you let them stare. Nobody that matters will think twice about it, one way or the other.’

Staring at his father in the mirror, Teal leaned over and gave him a big hug. ‘Thanks Dad.’

‘Don’t mention it. Seriously; as well-intentioned as this chat was, it’s probably only gone and made you late. You’d best get a move on. You know what the Opus City line is like.’

Teal nodded and headed for the door.

‘Just don’t walk out of this house with a rain cloud over your head. You make the day whatever you bring to it. Trust me. This is going to be the first day you walk into work and not think everything’s a complete disaster.’

Teal smiled as he slung his earphones around his neck.

‘You know what, Dad?’ he said. ‘I think you might be right.’

O-Bun Sesame (Kitchen)

‘It’s a complete disaster!’

Behind the glowing neon sign, amid the bustle of a busy shopping centre, Teal and the other employees of O-Bun Sesame were watching their supervisor slowly fall apart at the seams.

Dinah and Nidah, the maned wolf couple at the counter, had two very different ways of dealing with the slow-motion car crash behind them. Whilst Dinah couldn’t do much more than smile and man her till, Nidah was making the most of the day’s entertainment. Teal did his best to stop her fanning the flames any further. The kitchen was hot enough already.

‘Don’t lose hope, Mr Jeffries,’ he said, adjusting his face mask as he sliced potatoes with Melanie. ‘You say that every week.’

‘Yeah, every week,’ Dinah nodded sincerely.

‘Every single week,’ Nidah grinned.

‘Hey, could I get some ketchup?’ one of the customers asked. They picked the wrong day to be short on condiments. It was going to be a long wait.

‘Is he wrong, though?’ Melanie whispered in Teal’s ear. The meerkat put down the peeler and gave him a nudge. He turned away and did his best not to laugh.

‘I’d better be, Miss Sharpe,’ Mr Jeffries said, and Melanie stiffened up. ‘For all our sakes.’ She should’ve known better. Flying foxes were known for their keen sense of hearing.

Then again, they were also known for their cheerful dispositions. It was difficult to imagine them any other way, with their large, friendly eyes, and their small ears constantly rotating like miniature satellite dishes. But Mr Jeffries was

nothing if not an exception to the rules, his own especially.

He paced back and forth constantly between the kitchen and the counter, always muttering about something, but he was never too distracted that he missed an opportunity to tell his employees not to get distracted. Even if it was him they were being distracted by, and make no mistake – it often was.

On the worst days, he tended to fidget, and every time he did so, the thumbs of his wings would inevitably shoot out and catch onto something in the small space.

There was a lot of fidgeting that day.

Jules, the old slow loris, watched him go by as he manned the phone, stretching out to save a stack of pans that his wings clipped. Jules had known him by far the longest. How and why he'd stuck around for so long was a mystery to them all.

'Sorry. This job can drive you a little loopy sometimes,' Mr Jeffries said to Melanie. 'I'd be screeching at the walls if I didn't have you lot around.'

He reached out to try and pat her on the shoulder, but she leaned out of the way. He rubbed the back of his neck and laughed. 'Little seedlings in the breeze. When you're two child maintenance payments away from bankruptcy, and a life licking sap from trees in the local park, you'll understand. Life isn't all patty cakes and dib dabs. You don't know how good you have it here. I'll bet you've never seen a fur farm or holding camp with your own two eyes before.'

She adjusted her glasses and looked away. Teal shuddered while he chopped. His paw was clenching the knife so firmly, his claws started coming out. He'd learned enough about the conflict from history lessons at school. The Indo-Frasian revolt was still a fresh memory for many.

'I need you, Miss Sharpe. This whole place, everything I've got in this wonderful country, it's all on the line. You

know I love you people. I treat you like family. No, better even! But if we want to keep this little piece of heaven, we must fight for it. And if the cleaners still aren't coming, because they want more than my restaurant banks in a week, all of you are most definitely staying late again to get the place sorted out.'

Dinah blushed. 'I'd love to, really. But I've got a—'

'Girl to kiss? Me too,' Nidah agreed, wrapping an arm around Dinah's waist and nuzzling her.

'Ketchup?' the customer at the counter asked, slightly more desperately this time. Dinah reached for the ketchup packets, only for Nidah to catch her paw in mid-air and slowly lower it.

'Sauces only come with the purchase,' she whispered. 'Company policy.'

'I've got studying to do,' Melanie muttered.

Even Jules shook his head. 'Sorry boss,' he said, holding his hand over the phone receiver. 'Me and my lady have got plans tonight.'

Everybody's gaze centred on Teal. Even the customer was craning their neck to see what all the fuss was about. Teal felt his ears burning. He just wanted to disappear.

Mr Jeffries was standing by the deep-fat fryers, staring at him with the widest eyes. Sweat glistened on his brow, and his wings slowly drooped where he stood. He was wilting like a lettuce leaf on a hot summer day.

'I can stick around until six,' Teal breathed finally.

'Good man!' Mr Jeffries beamed, and his wings almost clipped the ceiling. 'Could you make that eight?'

'Don't let him push you around, Blue,' Melanie said, shaking her head. 'No one deserves to be taken for granted, least of all in a place like this.'

Mr Jeffries clutched at his chest. ‘A place like this? You joke, but your words cut me to the quick. This is my life. You may think you’re overqualified for peeling potatoes eight hours a day, but look around. That’s the world we’re living in. Here, you are always welcome. Here, you always have work to do. What would you do if “a place like this” fell apart?’

Melanie shrugged. ‘Peel potatoes next door? Bill’s Grills has been hiring for the past month, and the last I checked, they don’t expect unpaid overtime.’

Mr Jeffries’ wing shot out and knocked a stack of flyers into the air.

‘You know the rules, boss,’ Jules sighed, catching the flyers as they drifted down around him. ‘You should really have those wings banded when you’re on the clock.’

‘For real,’ Dinah said from the counter, her mouth creased with concern. ‘Even if you’re not on a clock, there are like, loads of regulations. We don’t want you—’

‘Getting into trouble,’ Nidah grinned. ‘Section fifteen in the employee safety handbook. You thought the cleaning costs were bad? Those fines would literally take you to the cleaners and back.’ Nidah took her hairnet off and ran a paw through her long locks. ‘Don’t worry,’ she winked. ‘We won’t tell if you don’t.’

For the first time, Mr Jeffries was too flustered to even respond. He looked to Jules for help just as the work phone started ringing. ‘Jules, tell them...!’

But Jules held up a single hand. He had already picked up the phone, and nobody interrupted Jules when he was on the phone. He listened to the caller intently, nodding along as he played with the phone cord, threading his digits through the coils. Rings of various sizes adorned his fingers.

‘So you’re sayin’ you want to use the “Half-Price Popcorn

Popper” deal, the “Feelin’ Fresh for Friday” deal and the “Hot, Hot, Hot to Trot, Trot, Trot” deal all in the same order?’ The slow loris paused for a moment to listen. ‘Well I’d like to clock off at three and finally get my dream set of gold crowns put in, but that ain’t the world, baby girl.’

Mr Jeffries swiped a nearby napkin and mopped his forehead with it. ‘We should all get our noses back to the grindstone. Remember everyone, the harder the work, the better the breaks! Let’s not let silly distractions get in the way.’

The thumb of his left wing latched onto the countertop. The employees of O-Bun Sesame all watched him fumble for several seconds, before finally unhooking it with his paws. ‘Maybe I should get these banded,’ he muttered to himself. He looked up to find everyone staring at him. ‘As pretty a picture as I am, there are probably better things to be looking at.’ Everyone turned away.

Teal’s phone pinged in his pocket.

‘As long as it’s not on your phone. Remember, no phones during work hours. Although if they want anything from the menu, I won’t complain. Never look a gift horse in the face!’

‘Sorry,’ Teal sniffed. ‘I could’ve sworn I turned it off.’ Sure enough, there was nothing on the home screen. He mashed the power button and shoved it in his pocket sheepishly.

‘That does remind me though. I should probably make a few calls...’ Mr Jeffries pulled out his mobile phone and paced to the back of the restaurant, tapping away.

‘After you get those wings banded!’ Jules called after him. But the door had already swung shut. He rolled his eyes and chuckled.

In the absence of the supervisor, everything at O-Bun

Sesame was running smoothly once more, to the relief of everybody waiting at the tills. Everybody except one customer, who at this point had been waiting there for quite some time.

‘Could I please just have one packet?’ they pleaded. ‘I’ll take mustard if I have to. You work in fast food – you know how impossible it is to get through a burger without any sauce.’

Dinah nodded emphatically to show her support. ‘They’re right, you know. I’ve tried. Just one little packet won’t hurt; I’ll shut my eyes so nobody knows. Oh come on, Nidey. Please...?’

Nidah turned around; Mr Jeffries was still busy in the back. She dropped a few ketchup packets into the customer’s paws.

‘My pay grade is too low to observe the rules to a sufficient enough degree to count this as breaking them,’ she muttered. ‘But you’d better squeeze every last inch of life out of those things. You hear me? Not one drop wasted.’

‘I... I promise.’

The customer walked away starry-eyed, holding the packets like they were the most precious thing in the world.

Dinah kissed her on the nose. ‘Thank you.’

‘All that for just one kiss?’

Dinah moved to kiss her again. ‘How about—’

‘Two?’ Nidah beat her to the kiss and smiled. ‘It was worth it for two.’

Teal listened to the two of them from the kitchen with a lump in his throat. The more he heard, the bigger it got. Dinah and Nidah made it seem so easy. One day, if he found the right person, he hoped he’d have the courage to tell them how he felt. If he hadn’t met them already...

But there were bigger things to worry about. Teal could feel Melanie simmering as she put an order together. She wasn't usually quiet unless she was in a bad mood, and right now, she wasn't making a single sound. The meerkat's eyes were slits.

'You okay?' Teal mumbled.

Melanie looked up sharply. 'Of course I'm okay,' she said. 'Is there any reason I shouldn't be okay?'

Teal flinched, infinitely relieved that all she was wielding was an empty burger box. 'I hope not.'

'Me neither,' she said. She sighed. 'He's right, you know. For once, he was right about something. We shouldn't be here. You know exactly what I mean.'

Teal looked away.

'I can name every major bone in the body of every mammal in the city. I could take you apart and put you back together again before we broke for lunch. I'll be a doctor long before this place ever turns a profit. And yet here I am, preparing potatoes to be removed of all their nutrients, pumped full of oil and fired directly into the greasy arteries of animals whose hearts deserve better owners. And that's on the good days, when the boss isn't screwing around and we actually get to do our jobs.'

Teal didn't know what to say. She had a point.

'And look at you, Blue. A guy that works so hard, he never seems to do anything else.'

Teal swallowed and tried to focus on chopping potatoes.

'Probably the first fox in his family to go to university too, right?'

His chopping sped up. Melanie seemed not to notice.

'So there you have a fox who's working his tail off with the pressure of his entire family on his shoulders, getting

ready to spend the next three years accruing a mountain of debt that any job acquired with a history degree won't have a hope in hell of paying off, and amidst all that, he's also doing long hours of unpaid overtime with no extra credit at one of the busiest shopping centres in Opus City...'

Teal's paw went faster and faster. The knife was a blur.

'Hey, Teal, you might want to—'

The knife slipped.

* * *

Teal flexed his paw and winced.

'Thanks Melanie.'

He was already onto his second blue plaster of the day. At least his second and third digits were matching now. And blue was his colour too. It was the smallest of consolations, but he'd be damned if he wasn't going to hold onto it.

'You sure you're okay?' Jules asked from the phone station.

'Never mind him – what about my knives?' Mr Jeffries joked, glancing nervously at Teal's digits. 'I see the way you use those things, Mr Arke. I swear, one of these times, it's going to be the knife that gives way. I'd rather it be one of my knives that gives way. How is the paw?'

'It's... fine,' Teal said, trying to hide the pain in his face as he flexed the finger up and down. 'I can move it around just fine.'

'Well that's fantastic – we'll break out the fireworks later! But in the meantime, I can't have you bleeding all over my potatoes. Whatever's going on inside that head, Mr Arke, please try to get it screwed on properly. Dull senses and sharp objects are a very bad mix. I suppose the kitchen does get very hot...'

Mr Jeffries wiped his brow. He pondered for a while

before he finally made a decision. 'I'm putting you two on the tills to cool off.'

'B-but I'm fine now, Mr Jeffries,' Teal stuttered. 'Honest.'

'No buts. I'm not explaining to your family why you came home without any fingers.'

'Understood.'

Teal untied his apron. He hung his head, walking in shame to the front and donning the O-Bun Sesame cap. Melanie followed suit, looking significantly happier about the arrangement.

Dinah and Nidah approached Teal with concern, but he reassured them that he was fine. They both patted him on the shoulder, before moving, with what can only be described as a look of extreme trepidation, towards the kitchen countertops, where the knives were still sitting, glinting in the light.

O-Bun Sesame (Counter)

Clearwater Shopping Centre was bustling. Animals of all shapes and sizes streamed through the various boutiques, and the food court was packed.

Teal received a few funny looks as he worked, but aside from a single request to touch his face, it was a relatively quiet day at O-Bun Sesame. One animal, an anarchic-looking raccoon with split jeans and green highlights in his fur, even came up to ask him who did his colouring.

'Thanks. I'm pretty sure it was my dad,' he laughed.

'That's sick. The guy really knows what he's doing!'

Teal smiled. 'I like to think so.'

The raccoon eventually swaggered away with one of every item on the menu. Teal followed his slow ascent up the escalators, where a group of similarly attired animals were waiting. They split the bags between themselves, chattering

excitedly.

Teal loved to people watch as he worked. It was definitely the highlight of the job.

On the second floor, a family of ermines seemed oblivious to the huge amounts of fur they were shedding as they bounded from shop to shop. An irate mastiff followed close behind with his large brush. However big it was, it didn't seem to be big enough.

Elsewhere, there was a huge buzz around Fox-Free, the latest clothes shop to open in the centre. The premise was that the clothing ranges were designed exclusively for non-Vulpes families. Teal wasn't a fan of gimmicks at the best of times, but then, he was an inner-city animal. He'd never been in a clothing shop that didn't have a red fox section.

A few of the shops he'd been fond of since he was a kit were still around, like Marvin's Munchables, a sweet shop he used routinely to stock up on pomme drops and chocolate fish, and Maneys, where his father took him once every year to get a new set of oversized jumpers to grow into.

Unfortunately, they didn't seem to be as popular as the larger boutiques that had sprung up around them. It was the first of February, barely a month into 2013. He hoped they'd still be around next year.

As always, there were plenty of weary vixens being led around by their excitable kits and world-weary teens. He looked at their tails wagging freely and sighed. After only a few hours of being fastened to his back, his own tail was already aching. Nothing felt better at the end of a long shift than undoing the straps and finally being able to flex it again. It was something he never thought he'd miss as a kit.

But at least it was something he could still miss. Living in the capital of Lower Britannia had its perks. All the country's

latest imports came through Opus City. That meant that all around him, Teal heard the latest music, and saw the most cutting-edge technology in action. Unfortunately, it also meant seeing the latest fads and trends first, which often turned out to be harbingers of worse things to come.

In the past few years, Teal had started to notice something cropping up more and more, and every time he saw it in person, he had to fight to wrench his eyes away. He found himself being prodded by Melanie on more than one occasion.

‘Blue? Hey, Blue, you’ve got to stop staring at the customers. You’re going to weird them out.’

‘Sorry, it’s just difficult.’

‘It’s the clipped tails, isn’t it?’

He nodded. ‘I don’t think I’m ever getting used to it.’ His eyes followed a few shoppers as they walked around obliviously, their tail nubs twitching left and right.

‘Well you’d better start, because it’s the future,’ she said. ‘Tails are a liability. They catch on things, they take up room, and regardless of what officials say, some animals can’t control them as well as others. Nubbers take up a lot less space on public transport. They don’t suffer from office tail either. Animals weren’t designed to sit in offices all day. Let’s face it – at this point, tails are largely vestigial. Clipped wings have been a thing for decades. Tails are just catching up.’

‘That’s easy for you to say,’ he shuddered. His tail twitched involuntarily within its constraints. ‘Meerkats have barely got one. You don’t have to think about what it’d be like to chop your arm off, for the sake of being squished into a train like sardines in a tin can. Plenty of folks are still happy with tail wrapping. Look, there are some right there.’

He nodded to a group of security foxes in uniform, whose tails were covered and bound to their backs. ‘Barely takes up

any more room either.'

'It looks stupid though. Come on, it does. And it doesn't stop pups growing up with ingrown tailbones either.'

'Good point. And we could solve earache at the same time by removing everybody's ears. Headaches suck too...'

She laughed. 'So does carpal tunnel, but I don't think that's why you were hacking at your fingers earlier. You really did a number on yourself. What's been going on with you? Lately, it's like you're not all there.'

He shrugged. 'I've just got a lot on my mind.'

'I'll say. Normally, we can trust you with the knives. Mind you, I'd still trust you over one of them.' She nodded to the maned wolves in the kitchen.

Nidah was busy filing her claws, which looked like they'd been pampered and stoned to within an inch of their lives. On the countertop, what may have been the entire stock of potatoes had been washed and peeled. And beside her, Dinah was chopping fries for an order like she'd never held a knife before. Of all the things she may have lacked, enthusiasm wasn't one of them. Nidah stared at her out of the corner of her eye, seemingly ready at any moment to jump in and save her from herself.

'That's not saying much,' Teal said. Melanie nodded.

They served a few more customers before Teal suddenly perked up. 'Wait, you never said whether it was going to be okay. My paw still hurts,' he said, and he pointed. 'Right there.'

Melanie stared at him blankly. 'What do you want me to do about it? Kiss it better?'

'I just want to know what the situation is.' Teal held his paw out. 'Am I going to die?'

She laughed. 'Are you asking for my professional

opinion?’

‘You’re not a doctor yet. Your normal one would be just fine.’

‘Rude. You’ll end up getting killed by something else if you’re not careful. And painfully too. Trust me, a doctor knows.’

She took his paw in her hands and gestured to it as she spoke. ‘You’re lucky I’m studying this stuff. That knife’s sharp as hell – it could have easily slipped in the joint between the distal and intermediate phalanges, and given your fingertip a quick getaway. But the angle was perfect. It bounced straight off. It was disinfected and bound immediately, so my diagnosis? No impaired motor function. Leave it alone, and you’ll be just fine.’

Teal sighed in relief. ‘You could have said that ten minutes ago.’

She grinned. ‘You didn’t ask ten minutes ago. But make sure it doesn’t happen again, or you’ll be talking to a paramedic next time. Stress kills, you know. You having trouble at home?’

Teal shook his head fervently.

‘Not getting enough sleep?’

He shook his head again, a little less convincingly this time.

She paused. ‘Experiencing any... frustration?’

‘What the hell’s that supposed to mean?’ he barked.

She nodded to the counter.

He turned around, and his eyes widened. He hoped his blue fur was hiding how red his cheeks had become. ‘Oh, hey Finn.’

Finn was standing by the counter, smiling absent-mindedly and scratching the back of his ears. He often did so when he

was nervous. Teal had known the fennec since they were kits together. Today, he was wearing a hat with a large set of antlers sticking out of the top. For some reason, it suited him.

‘Hey!’

There was a short pause. Teal tried to speak, but no words came out. His mind was racing. For a moment, he forgot where he was. Then, he remembered the cap sitting on his head, and his mouth kicked into auto-pilot. ‘Welcome to O-Bun Sesame, home of the freshest ingredients, where you say the magic words and get your heart’s desire! What would like today?’

‘You,’ Finn said. Teal’s eyes widened. Finn blushed and looked away immediately. ‘Oh god, I didn’t mean—’

‘No, of course not.’

‘I was confused, because of...’

‘The store motto.’

‘Yeah...’

The till chimed next to them as Melanie completed an order. She stared at the two of them, licking her hand and slowly separating the banknotes she’d been given before putting them in the till. She pushed the till box slowly until it closed.

Ding!

‘Anyway,’ Finn flushed, ‘I was just looking for you. History Society’s doing a raffle tonight, and this month, the prize is actually worth winning. In honour of Takayoshi Kojima’s visit, it’s a free trip to Sakurai!’

Teal’s mouth fell open. Sakurai? Images of cherry blossoms and ancient shrines danced in his head. Takai, the capital city, was known as the ‘neon capital of the world’, and for such a small country, it was one of the most colourful, technologically advanced places on the globe.

‘That sounds amazing!’ Teal said.

‘So you’re in?’ Finn asked, reaching into his pocket.

Teal was quick to shake his head. ‘No no, I can’t. You know I never win anything. And besides, I’d never be able to take the time off.’ He leaned in close to whisper. ‘I’m only a page into binturong medicine, and I already want to claw my eyes out. It’s the most boring thing in the world. You’ve been warned.’

Finn laughed, the antlers on his head bobbing around.

‘Teal, we don’t even start that module for another term. But I thought you’d say that, so I took the liberty of putting you in for it anyway.’ His paw came out of his pocket, holding a small receipt stub.

Teal just stood there. He didn’t know what to say.

‘Look, we both know you’re the bigger history nerd. You’d enjoy it more than I would. So if you end up beating all the odds and actually win this thing, just make sure you bring back some awesome pics, and maybe a keyring or two!’

‘I... I will,’ Teal stuttered. At this point, there wasn’t enough fur in the world to hide the fact that he was blushing. ‘Thank you so much. You shouldn’t have.’

‘It’s nothing.’ Finn leaned over the counter and gave him a quick hug. Teal did his best to avoid the barrage of plush antlers that prodded at his face. ‘Besides,’ Finn added, ‘I never paid you back for that coffee two weeks ago. Or the coffee last month. A few of the ones last month, actually. You do that a lot, and you never even think twice about it.’

‘Well you know what that means,’ Teal said.

Finn cocked his head.

‘You’re clearly drinking too much coffee.’

He laughed. ‘Nope, pretty sure that’s impossible.’

‘Want to put that to the test?’

Finn grinned. ‘Just name the date. I’m not even joking – I’d totally be down for that if you are! You get the coffee, I’ll get the dipping sticks? Or we could go bowling? There’s a Pinheads around the corner.’

Teal answered in his head almost immediately. ‘Yes, yes, a thousand times yes.’ But reality quickly came crashing down, as it always did. He sighed.

‘I’m actually really busy this week. Work’s got me booked out, you know? But maybe...’

‘Another time?’

‘Yeah.’ Teal felt a knot building up in his throat. He was making a mistake, and he knew it. ‘It’s really good to see you though.’

‘You too,’ Finn said. ‘You tend to lose that “I’m crying for help just behind the eyes” look after a good chat.’ Teal glared at him, and did his best not to smile.

‘You are so dead.’

‘Now that’s no way to talk to a paying customer.’

He balked. ‘You’re not a paying customer.’

‘Touché.’

‘Not that we’d serve the likes of you anyway,’ Melanie added from the adjoining till. Finn clutched his chest in mock outrage.

‘Et tu, Brute? Et tu?’

Teal’s paw went straight to his face. ‘Why do I talk to you?’

‘I have no idea, but you should definitely keep doing it. Which reminds me, you know something crazy?’ Teal shrugged. ‘We still don’t have each other’s phone numbers. Even after all this time.’

Teal blushed. ‘To be fair, we lived right next to each other for fifteen years. Rocks were cheaper.’ He decided not to add

that he'd always been too shy to ask for it.

'Cheaper? Not for our parents it wasn't. They kept having to replace the windows.' Teal grinned despite himself. 'Look, I know we see each other around campus anyway, but it'd be cool to be able to chat outside of class too. We could figure out a date for that coffee thing. If... that sounds good to you?'

Teal nodded, his heart fluttering. 'That sounds great.'

Finn laughed; he looked immensely relieved. 'Awesome,' he said. 'You got your phone on you?'

'Sure,' Teal said. He glanced back at the kitchen, where Mr Jeffries was pacing nervously, as always. 'Oh, but I can't get my phone out during hours. My boss would kill me.'

'That's cool. I'll just give you mine,' he said. He pinched a napkin from the nearby dispenser and scribbled it down with a ballpoint pen. He looked up to find Teal inspecting his hat. 'So what do you think of my rack?'

Teal rolled his eyes. 'It's dumb as all hell, and I love it. You really suit them. You... make quite a cute deer.'

Finn looked down. 'Thanks. I think you would, too.'

'Not at this time of year,' Teal laughed. 'Mine'd definitely be the first to go. Although I guess it doesn't matter during shedding season. In a month, everyone'll be walking around with bare heads.'

'Darn, and I just got these things too! Where am I supposed to hang my running shoes now?' Finn joked. A customer joined the queue behind him. He quickly passed Teal the napkin. 'I'd better buy something,' he whispered. 'So I don't get you into trouble.' He cleared his throat theatrically. 'Could I get a medium pack of chilli sesame fries, please?'

'Absolutely, sir! That'll be two pounds ninety-nine!'

Finn's jaw dropped open. 'Two ninety-nine? How the hell are you still in business?'

‘I honestly don’t know, sir.’ Finn laughed. ‘And do you want to try our fresh honey mustard dip?’

‘I don’t know. Do I?’

Teal looked behind the counter, where Dinah had just finished squirting a whole bottle of honey into the pot. Nidah was out on one of her smoke breaks, and Mr Jeffries was busy trying to pick the rest of the flyers back up. She dipped her paw in to taste it. Teal rushed back to the kitchen.

‘Not today you don’t!’ he yelled back.

* * *

‘Lunch break!’ Mr Jeffries called. He placed the sign at the front of the counter. Everybody heaved a collective sigh of relief, taking off their badges and pinching their lunches from the rack.

‘Thanks, I’m starved! We love you really, Mr Jeffries,’ Dinah said. She leaned over to peck him on the cheek as she walked past with her sandwich. ‘Even if...’

‘You’re garbage and you don’t deserve us,’ Nidah concluded.

Dinah blanched. ‘Running a restaurant is super hard. Probably harder than running a marathon, because you never get to the end. You don’t deserve all your money worries,’ she clarified.

‘But you definitely don’t deserve us,’ Nidah said.

Mr Jeffries sighed, looking around himself at the animals eagerly unwrapping their lunches. ‘I know, I know. But things are going to get better around here. You all know they’re going to get better, right?’

The only response was the constant bubbling of hot oil in the fryers.

Melanie tucked into her burger straight away, sitting alone, as she always did, for hygiene reasons. By contrast, Dinah and

Nidah shared theirs with each other.

‘Don’t you love it,’ Dinah mumbled between bites, ‘how we always finish each other’s s—?’

‘Sentences?’ Nidah said, licking her claws.

Dinah shook her head. ‘S—’

‘Sentiments?’

Dinah stuck her tongue in her cheek. ‘I was going to say sandwiches.’

Nidah leaned in close and chomped the last big bite of her sandwich. ‘Yes, I do rather like it,’ she munched happily.

Next to them, Jules was savouring one fry after another. Teal sat opposite with his paws empty, watching him. Nobody could make a meal go further than Jules. To the old slow loris, it seemed that every bite was sacred.

‘Hey, sport.’

It took Teal a moment to realise Jules was talking to him. He looked up. ‘Mhmm?’

Jules nodded to a pair of empty chairs nearby. They both got up and moved over. ‘What’s scratchin’ at your brain case?’

Teal shrugged.

‘Is that an “I don’t know” shrug, or an “I ain’t tellin’ you Jack” shrug?’

‘It’s an “I ain’t tellin’ you, Jules” shrug,’ Teal smiled. Jules laughed.

‘Come now, I ain’t gonna tell nobody. You kids always keep so much bottled up. Animals are a bit like yarn, you know? The older they get, the more tangled they end up. Sooner or later, you’ve gotta unwind it, or it’ll be more knot than string.’

Teal looked down. If it had been anyone else, he would have changed the subject immediately. But there was

something about Jules that made him trust him.

‘I don’t know. It just feels like... my home’s too small, but the world’s too big, you know? At least here, I know what I’m doing. If I tried to make it out there and everything fell apart, what would I do? I wouldn’t be able to go back.’

Jules nodded. ‘Don’t worry. I know exactly whatcha mean. You’re in a space between the spaces. One door’s open, but you’re scared of going through it because the other door’s gonna close right behind you.’

Teal nodded. ‘So what should I do?’

‘Hell if I know,’ he laughed. ‘But don’t it feel better to have it off your chest?’

Teal smiled back sheepishly. ‘A little. Thanks.’

‘Don’t sweat it. Life has a way of figurin’ itself out. I’ve been in the space between the spaces plenty of times. Last time I was stuck there, I was tryin’ to figure out how to propose to the most amazin’ lady in the world. Drove me nuts for years.’

‘How did you finally get out?’

‘She beat me to it.’

‘Oh.’

Jules raised an eyebrow. ‘That help?’

‘Not at all,’ Teal said. Jules laughed and patted him on the shoulder. ‘But congrats. You got lucky.’

‘I did. But don’t tell her that.’ He promised that he wouldn’t.

Teal got up from the table and unfolded one of the O-Bun Sesame takeaway bags. Melanie looked at him in disgust, pausing mid-bite. Sauce dripped onto the wrapper.

‘You’re not going to...?’

Teal pinched a burger and fries from the hot rack, hissing through his teeth at the heat. They went straight in the bag.

‘I have to.’ He sucked his singed digits and folded the top of the bag over.

‘Again?’

‘You bet.’

‘You know cold fast food is harder to eat than the cardboard it comes in, right?’

‘It’ll still be warm when my dad gets it.’

She leaned forwards. ‘Here’s a crazy idea. How about you eat your lunch for once?’

Teal shook his head. ‘He needs it more than I do.’

‘I don’t know if that’s even possible, beanpole. You’re about two missed meals away from the emergency room.’

‘Give it a day. If I collapse at work tomorrow, you can have my next lunch.’

She nodded as Teal grabbed his things and headed for the door. ‘You’re on.’

He clipped his earphones on, adjusting the tiny speakers until they sat perfectly over his ears, and flicked through his music with his thumb. There were so many options to choose from. Underbite, Bats out of Hell, Lulled Obliging to Awakeness, Huffing Grey, Mr Miso and his Travelling Crouton Circus...

He thought for a moment. Did he really want to take the train? It would only mean having to buy another set of tickets, and his student loan was already stretching thin. The office his father worked at wasn’t far. It would be a good way to stretch his legs, especially after so many hours cooped up inside. But he’d be against the clock.

He flexed his hind paws and grinned. Any excuse for a run.

Now, all he had to do was decide on the music. He needed something fast-paced. Something he could run to. No, not just

that. Something he'd look cool running to.

Bats out of Hell it was.

Streets

Running through the city was the best feeling in the world.

The cold wind whistled in his ears and ruffled through the fur on his cheeks. There was a faint scent of petrol fumes, but compared to the heady atmosphere of grease and cleaning fluid in O-Bun Sesame, it was the cleanest, crispest air he ever tasted.

The hood of his jacket billowed out behind him, his bag straps barely holding themselves together as his arms pumped furiously at his sides, first left, then right, then left again, spurring him forwards and pushing what felt like the entire world behind him. It didn't matter how much Opus City's tallest towers dwarfed him. Tall or small, at this speed, they blurred together all the same.

He raced down a line of shop windows. For a second, his reflection even seemed to be waving at him in the glass. He waved back, laughing at the concentration on the face of the scrawny blue fox tearing down the pavement, his tail lashing unrestrained from side to side. The golden accents on his black jacket glowed in the sun. For one serene moment, everything was just right with the world.

And then he passed them, and the moment was gone.

But he didn't stop running. There was something about the breathlessness of it all, the bitter chill of the wind running through his fur and biting his lungs that made him feel like he could run anywhere in the world, if only he knew where to go. It made him feel like anything was possible...

'Stop!'

It was funny how quickly one word could change

everything.

Teal was less than a minute away from where his father worked. All he had to do was drop off his lunch. He didn't have to stop. And yet already, he could feel his legs straining to come to a halt.

'What the hell am I doing?' he muttered. He slowed to a crawl and pressed himself against the wall. The voices were coming from an alleyway nearby. Carefully, he inched his way over to the corner. He could smell the fear in the air.

The voices got louder and louder. Whatever was going on, it wasn't good. Teal tried to risk a peep, laying his ears back and holding his whiskers down, but ultimately, he couldn't bring himself to poke his head around. He didn't know what they'd do to him if he got caught. There was another angry shout.

'Wait...'

He lay flat on the ground, feeling his heart beating in his throat. Patting his pockets down, he found his phone and turned the camera on. He placed it on the ground. There was nothing on the screen but grey bricks. Holding his breath, he inched the phone forwards as much as he dared, until the camera on the back was peeking out past the wall. The screen sparked into life. Suddenly, he could see everything.

By the steps of a nearby fire escape staircase, a gang of animals was slowly closing in on a lone pudú, who was holding a bloody nose. Teal zoomed in closer, only to be shocked to find that he recognised the logo on their jackets. They were all athletes from one of Opus City University's sports teams.

On looks alone, he couldn't tell the captain among the deer, the wolves, the martens and the rest, but the deep voice was unmistakable.

‘Say it again!’ The tallest of the bucks stepped forward. Behind him, the sports team barked their support, even as a few of them exchanged nervous glances, seemingly unsure of what to do. The pudú tried to take a step back, only to hit the underside of the staircase. He was trapped.

‘You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’ he mocked. But his cocky exterior shrank as the buck closed in. ‘Hello? Anyone? Little help?’

Just a few houses down, cars were driving past, and pedestrians were walking idly by, ignoring what was going on.

‘Do something,’ Teal whispered to himself. ‘Help them.’

He tilted the phone around. Even the martens were a head taller than he was. He’d get beaten to a pulp if he tried to fight back. But that didn’t mean he shouldn’t try, right? He had to do something. Anything.

He pulled the phone back. ‘I’ll... call the police,’ he said. ‘Yeah, they’ll know what to do. They can help.’ He closed his eyes as his thumb keyed in the familiar code. ‘Coward,’ he muttered under his breath, dialling away. His paw was shaking so much, he had to start over several times. ‘Coward...’

From the alleyway, all he could make out were sneers and grunts. Then, another cry for help. He shook his head. His heart was beating a drum. ‘What am I doing?’ he whispered to himself. He couldn’t just sit there and listen. He clenched his fist until his knuckles cracked. Was he stupid? He didn’t know. But he was about to find out.

He took a deep breath, and slowly poked his head around the corner.

His phone vibrated suddenly in his pocket, the ringtone blaring out for anyone to hear. He snapped his head back and

tapped away at the screen in blind panic. ‘Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!’

But it was too late. The voices were murmuring to each other. In his haste, Teal hit the wrong button, and the camera flash went off, lighting up the alleyway. Every muscle in his body clenched. His tail stood on end as he got ready to run. But then, he heard something he never expected to hear.

Footsteps.

They were running away, yelling between themselves as their every footfall gradually became fainter and fainter. When he finally worked up the courage to peek around the corner, they were nowhere to be seen. Only the pudú was left, holding his nose and sitting with his back to the wall. Teal ran up to him.

‘Hey, are you okay?’

He laughed and wiped his eyes. There was a smear of blood down his cheek, and his clothes were matted and filthy. ‘Course! I’m always okay, me.’

‘Where does it hurt?’

‘Nowhere that wasn’t hurting before,’ he grimaced, pinching his nose. A dribble of blood trickled down. ‘Darn. I could’ve sworn I just stopped that!’

Teal searched his pockets for a tissue. Eventually, he found one, and dusted off the lint.

‘I’ve just got to hold my head back, right?’ the pudú asked, tilting his face up.’ Teal pressed the large tissue to his nose and tilted it back down again.

‘No, no, no, you don’t want to swallow it. I’ve got a friend who’s a doctor. Well, almost. Anyway, just keep your head forward like that and ride it out. Luckily, if they really wanted to hurt you, they don’t look like they did a very good job.’

‘They don’t make ’em like they used to,’ he grinned.

‘Woah!’

Without warning, he swayed backwards and grabbed desperately onto Teal’s collar. Teal held him up with both paws, standing there patiently until he found his footing once more. Gradually, his legs stopped shaking. The pudú looked almost amused, even as his face wrinkled in pain. ‘Sorry, I haven’t done this in a while. I guess I’m still getting used to it.’

‘Nobody should ever have to get used to this,’ Teal muttered. ‘I don’t know what they were thinking.’

‘Probably not very much,’ the pudú said.

Teal nodded. ‘Agreed. I’m going to call an ambulance now, if that’s okay.’ He reached into his pocket for his phone. The pudú grabbed his paw abruptly.

‘No, it’s fine. I really don’t need it.’

‘But look at you!’

The pudú shrugged. ‘Hey, I’ve been worse.’ He laughed uproariously and waved at one of the pedestrians walking nearby. They quickly averted their gaze and strode out of sight. The pudú wiped his face again. ‘Blood not a good look, huh? They were probably scared they’d catch plague off me. That, or homelessness.’

He turned to Teal. ‘Honestly, I haven’t felt this good in years. Thanks for helping though, Blue. I didn’t catch your name.’

‘Teal,’ Teal said, his brow furrowed. He was more than a little confused. ‘Teal Arke. And you?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Your name?’

‘Ah, yes.’

Teal waited for a moment. ‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Do I need a name?’

‘Most animals do. You can’t do much without a name.’

‘Then you can call me Nook,’ he grinned.

‘Right,’ Teal nodded, feeling none the wiser. There was a sudden growl in between the two. Teal stepped back and raised his paws. ‘That wasn’t me.’

Nook patted his stomach. ‘That’ll be me, then. Guilty as charged. Sorry, partner.’

‘No, don’t be sorry. Don’t be sorry at all,’ Teal said. Without hesitation, he swung his backpack over his shoulder and took out the O-Bun Sesame bag. The burger and fries were still warm. ‘Here. It’s not good food, but it’ll fill you up.’

‘Hey, I’ll take what I can get,’ he replied, nodding his thanks as he unwrapped the burger and crouched down.

‘Is there anything else I can do?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, chewing away. ‘Is there?’ Teal stared at him, even more confused. Nook just laughed. ‘No, you’ve done enough. More than enough. You’ve been great!’

‘Thanks...’ Teal nodded awkwardly. If he stayed any longer, he was going to be late for work. He turned to leave.

‘I saw you waiting behind the corner,’ Nook called out.

Teal felt blood rushing to his cheeks. ‘I-I’m sorry. I wasn’t... I’m not a... strong person...’

Nook’s eyes narrowed as he ate. ‘Do you wish you were?’

Teal looked down at the ground and said nothing.

Nook slapped his knee. ‘Come on kid, I’m only playing! You think you could’ve done more? Look at that lot!’ He wiped his mouth and nodded to the street in front of them. ‘They won’t have any trouble sleeping tonight, and neither should you. Now don’t you have somewhere to be?’

Teal looked up. ‘Oh god, yeah. Listen, I’ve really got to go,’ he said, breaking into a jog. ‘But you stay safe out here, Nook!’

‘Nah, it’s the world that’s got to stay safe from me!’ Nook called back.

Teal shook his head. He was laughing before he hit his tenth stride. What a strange guy.

When he finally made it to the office block, he ran straight past it and continued down the street. He just had to make one quick stop at a café first. It wouldn’t be much of a lunch break without the lunch.

Office Block

‘Sorry it’s just a sandwich this time Dad,’ Teal said, pushing the paper bag through the office window. His father grabbed the top and carefully manoeuvred it inside. ‘Stuff happened.’

His father scoffed. ‘Teal, you shouldn’t have.’ Then, he seemed to go pale. ‘But never mind that. Is that... blood on your shirt?’ Teal looked down and saw a smear of red on his collar.

‘Long story, no time, tell you later, bye!’ he called, picking up his feet once more. If his father had any words for him, he didn’t catch them. He couldn’t afford to be any later than he already was. Being stuck in a kitchen with Mr Jeffries for eight hours was punishment enough. He didn’t have to be angry too.

But working in the kitchen was still heaven compared to cleaning it. It was a five-person job, and he knew that he’d be doing it alone. The alternative was cleaning up the additional mess that Mr Jeffries would make by trying to help. The mere thought of it made him shudder; it didn’t bear thinking about.

He crossed his fingers while he ran. Maybe, just maybe, if fate was feeling kind, Mr Jeffries would let him go home early. At any rate, he prayed that he wouldn't have to clean the ice cream machine this time.

There was nothing worse in the world than cleaning the ice cream machine.

O-Bun Sesame

'How's that ice cream machine coming along, Mr Arke?'

'Just finished it!' Teal called back. He wiped his forehead with the back of his paw and let out a sigh of relief. 'I'll never feel clean again,' he added under his breath, 'but I finished it.' He cleared his throat. 'I'll just mop the floors, and then it should be all done!'

'You're a workhorse!' Mr Jeffries called from the office. 'Are you sure you don't want help? I swabbed many floors back home. I even figured out a way to hold a second mop using my wings, which really cuts down on time if you get it just right!'

'Yes, Mr Jeffries, I'm definitely sure. I've got it!'

The shopping centre was a graveyard by now, which suited Teal just fine. He could put his earphones on and let music wash over him for a few hours. The fact that he was helping Mr Jeffries out made it a little easier. He knew he was being taken advantage of. They all did – O-Bun Sesame would have gone out of business months ago without them, whether Mr Jeffries realised it or not. But things were improving, slowly but surely.

And if Mr Jeffries were in a better position, maybe things would be different. Maybe...

He bobbed his head along to the music, mopping away. There was something therapeutic about losing himself in the

repetitive motion, even if he had to interrupt it occasionally to stifle a yawn. He soon found himself battling against his droopy eyelids.

Once, he came so close to falling asleep, his tail slipped into the bucket. It was so warm, it took a while to register that it was sloshing about with all the gunk of the kitchen. ‘This’ll be the last time,’ he groaned, wringing his tail out into the bucket. ‘No more, Mr Jeffries,’ he yawned. ‘No more.’

When he was finally done, he washed his tail in the sink and patted it down with disposable kitchen towels. Cleaning hadn’t taken as long as he expected. If he caught the next train, he could still be home by seven. He took his earphones off.

‘Mr Jeffries?’ he shouted. It echoed through the walls, but only silence followed. ‘Mr Jeffries?’

Teal made his way over to the office, but there was nobody there. He scratched his head. He checked in each of the rooms one by one, but every time, he was nowhere to be seen. It was as though Mr Jeffries had vanished. He’d almost given up looking for him when he noticed muffled noises coming from the walk-in freezer. He tiptoed over to it and peeked through the window.

Mr Jeffries was sitting with his back to the shelf rack, holding his phone up to his face. His wings were curled around him. For once, they didn’t seem to be twitching around.

‘I know, I know, it’s a very pretty picture. Look at that! Thom, look how amazing your sister’s drawing is. Do you think she’s going to be an artist?’ He paused and listened. Then he laughed. ‘Don’t be like that. Your drawings all go on the fridge too, and they’re just as pretty.’ He laughed again. ‘Well if you work hard and keep practising your colours,

you'll be able to draw like her one day. There's nothing you can't do if you put the work in first. But you're already yards better than me, remember? You could beat me with your wings blindfolded!

He almost dropped the phone.

'What was that? Was that the front door?' His voice instantly became strained. 'Okay, you can put the phone down now. Don't tell Ma I called, okay? Don't tell her, or Papa will get into trouble. But he loves you very, very much, and he's going to see you—'

His wings fell around him as he closed his eyes, and dropped the phone slowly to his side. His small nose wrinkled.

Holding his breath, Teal tiptoed back a few paces and waited for a while as he stood there, thinking. Eventually, he cleared his throat.

'Mr Jeffries!' he called, cupping his paws around his mouth. 'I'm going to lock up now and head home, okay?'

For a few seconds, there was silence. Then, something clattered from within the walk-in freezer walls.

'Mhmm!'

Teal sighed and grabbed his coat. 'Good night, Mr Jeffries!' He didn't get a reply.

Train

Teal leaned back in his seat as the train pulled out of Greater Prospects. He was only two zones away from home. Out of the window, the sky was a brilliant red. The sun did its best to cling on, but it was no use. Teal watched it slowly disappear below the horizon.

It was a quiet night. The carriage jostled to a halt, one stop after another. As the announcer called each one out, Teal

checked it off in his head.

‘Now entering Minor Prospects. Foxward Street. Sunder Hill. Hunter Close. Fallow’s Brooke...’

He looked around the carriage. There was only one other animal there, a tired-looking deer sitting by himself in the corner. Skin hung from his antlers in great clumps. He held a wad of tissues against his head that grew redder and redder with every stop, and there was no antler cosy in sight.

Presumably, he thought he’d be able to make it home in time.

Teal tried his best not to stare. Poor guy. Nobody liked being caught short. But it was only early February, so there were plenty more where that came from. He wondered if it would be worth getting a roll of antler wrap the next time he went shopping. The passenger toilets never had enough to go around, and being trapped in a carriage with thirty shedding bucks wasn’t anybody’s idea of fun.

‘Now entering Lower Prospects.’

Teal’s ears perked up. ‘That’s me.’

Home

You knew your place in the city from how much of the sky you could see over your head. Teal was more than happy to leave the skyscrapers behind, as the buildings around him gradually got shorter and shorter.

But it wasn’t until he saw those familiar slanted red roofs and hanging pot plants that he knew he was home again.

Before opening the door, he looked at his warped reflection in the big red doorknocker. He gave it a big toothy grin, but it didn’t take long for his lips to uncurl, and for his smile to fade into a weary frown. ‘Wow. Long day, huh? You should see the other guy.’

Other guy... that reminded him. He hoped the homeless

puđú was doing okay, wherever he was.

The slow creaking of the front door hinge was comforting in a way that words couldn't describe. Teal had lived there all his life. It was the sound of his childhood, and his teenage years. But as he stepped into the hallway and kicked off his shoes, he was greeted in a very unexpected fashion.

'You're a monster, you hear me? A heartless cretin, a promise of nothingness now and even less to come!'

Teal smiled and shook his head. 'Hey, I'm back!' he said, shutting the door behind him. 'Shouting at the radio again?'

'The Minister for Education just cut student grants to the lowest they've ever been. Are you sure you don't want to get in here and shout with me?'

'Maybe later,' Teal said. He rubbed his eyes. 'Maybe later. I'm sorry I missed tea.'

'Don't be. I know what Mr Jeffries is like – he can come and apologise himself. It's in the microwave when you need it.'

'Dad, you're the best.'

'I know. It runs in the family.'

Teal was just about to open his bedroom door when a flash of movement caught his eye. He followed it to the corner, where a vase of chrysanthemums sat on a stand by the window. They must have been watered recently, because Teal could see a small figure dancing on the pool that had formed at the top.

'Hello, little guy.'

It was a moth. Every one of its wing flicks and leg twitches sent ripples all around. This wasn't the first time Teal had seen a moth floating on the plant. He was pretty sure it was the same moth too. 'Now,' Teal said, bending one of the leaves down and scooping the moth out of the water. 'I can't

keep doing this, so you've got to stop jumping in. Okay?'

The moth flailed its little legs about.

'You've got to give me something stronger than that. I don't want to come home one day to find you face down in the water. You guys don't get long. You've got to make the most of it.'

The moth's wings twitched left and right, drying in the air. One antenna twitched as its head bent down.

'Was that a nod?'

The wings stopped moving. Its antenna twitched again.

'I'll take that as a yes. Now go on, fly free.'

With a little hop, it took into the air, did a circle and flew straight into the water again.

'Oh come on!'

Teal took it into his paws and fumbled for the window latch. He put it outside, and quick as a flash, the window was shut.

'Look, I know it's hard,' he told the moth through the glass. 'But there's always a better way.' He smiled apologetically. 'You've got this. You come from a long, long line of moths just like yourself. You were here for millions of years, and before then, you were around in different forms. Maybe even a fish, ironically,' he laughed. 'Hell, you were here in some way or other before life even existed. You're made of star dust. It doesn't get more amazing than that.'

The moth put a leg up on the glass.

'It'll be okay,' Teal said. 'I promise. Just don't give up, whatever you do!'

The moth clapped its wings together and flew into the night.

Teal trudged over to his bedroom. Inside, the first thing he saw was the mountain of research notes. He rested a paw on

them. He could almost feel the resignation letter underneath. He closed his eyes. ‘Whatever you do...’

He bent down and picked up one of his study books. But less than two sentences in, his eyes were already trailing off the page. The history of medicine in early seventeenth century binturongean society wasn’t going anywhere. It could wait one more day.

Instead, he flopped onto his bed. His hind paws hung off the edge by a good few inches, but he’d no sooner have changed that than anything else in the room. After wriggling out of his jacket, he lay back and just groaned for the best part of a minute. He felt better after that.

Reaching over to his cabinet, he lifted the pile of research notes and pulled out the laptop underneath. He’d had it for the best part of a decade, so he waited patiently for it to boot up. It had been a strange day. Not remarkable by any stretch of the imagination, and yet somehow, it felt like a week had gone by. At least it had been nice to see Finn again. Wait... Finn!

His paw shot to his pockets, but it was already too late. He sighed, letting his arm flop down onto the bed. The napkin, and subsequently Finn’s number, was miles away by now.

What a lousy day after all.

The laptop screen sparked into life, lighting up Teal’s eyes. The profile picture showed them both playing together, battling each other with hoses in the searing summer heat. He smiled, remembering how cool the water had been as it soaked into his fur. The loser had been the real winner in that fight.

He stifled a yawn as he tapped his password in, and lazily flicked through the list of unread emails. None of them were in the slightest bit interesting. Except one. It had the subject

line, ‘Congratulations! You are the proud winner of...’

Teal rolled his eyes. ‘Don’t tell me. Fifty thousand pounds straight from the bank account of an Umibian prince.’ He looked at the address of the sender. It was from Opus City University. His eyes widened. ‘Wait...’ He clicked the link.

‘No. It can’t be...’ A long, slow shiver was working its way up his back. It had to be some kind of joke. But there it was on the screen, as clear as day.

‘I can’t believe it,’ he said. His mouth fell open. ‘I won. I’m going to Sakurai.’

Author's Note:

'Thank you...'

Thank you for reading Chapter One of *The End Where It Begins!* I hope you enjoyed it! Keep your eyes peeled for Chapter Two, which is coming soon!

This book is free, published online exclusively at www.t-larc.com, and there will never be any pay walls or barriers to entry. As a result, if you'd like to support me directly, it'd be awesome if you could chuck a [Ko-fi](#) or [PayPal](#) tip my way! It keeps me drinking tea and eating sandwiches, and I'd greatly appreciate any donations that you feel like sending!

But if not, that's cool too! You're already supporting me by reading and enjoying my stuff, so thanks a ton! And if you'd like to support the project in other ways, share the link, spread the word and get a conversation going on social media! Fan art and fan theories are both welcome!

So what are your favourite characters and scenes? Which secrets have you spotted, and what do you think is going to happen next?

Until next time, stay safe, stay kind, and as always, stay hydrated!