

More than eight years had passed since that tearful farewell, during which time a great deal had changed in Shaun's life. While still living in the same town as ever, he'd found himself a place of his own within walking distance of the office job he'd acquired a few years previously: a comfortable two bedroom apartment which, until recently, he had shared with an old high school friend; the very same friend who had stood him up at that showing of A Grub's Life all those years ago. However, the gecko had recently earned himself a promotion, a promotion which necessitated moving fifty kilometres away to the big smoke. As such, Shaun now found himself puttering about his apartment on his own, doing his best to keep up with the rent while waiting for someone to reply to his ad for a new flatmate.

As it transpired, the tiger hadn't received any form of contact from Cassandra since she'd left. Shaun wasn't particularly surprised by this: being the rambunctious kid she was, he was quite sure that he'd become little more than a vague, distant memory the instant she had departed for wherever it was she called home. Occasionally he would think back on the evening she'd accosted him and his subsequent babysitting duties, a soft chuckle never failing to emerge at the thought.

After hurrying in from the steady downpour that had dogged him throughout his journey home and shaking the worst of the damp from his hair which had become plastered to his forehead, obscuring his field of vision, Shaun made his habitual afterwork detour to the bank of mailboxes in the lobby of his apartment building. With the even increasing reliance on electronic communication it was rare for the feline to find anything more than junk mail waiting for him, but he was always sure to check for any snail-mail of consequence at least once every few days. As expected, he discovered around half a dozen flyers advertising nothing of any real interest waiting for him when he unlocked the metal-fronted pigeonhole. However, within the jumble of flagrant wastes of resources he discovered a letter; made even more unusual by its appearance of being handwritten. Intrigued, Shaun carefully checked the wad of junk for anything else of interest before dumping it all in a nearby recycling bin, then made for the elevator.

The envelope opened with merciful ease for the feline who had flopped down on his sofa, the faintly purple paper sliding out without difficulty. He glimpsed an elegantly cursive script; elaborate but perfectly legible. After a brief stretch to iron any kinks out of his joints, he began to read.

*Dear Shaun,*

*I am not sure if you will remember me, but I certainly remember you. It has been a very, very long time since we last spoke to each other and, as that is no fault of yours at all, I beg that you'll forgive me. You see, my family has long been wary of foreigners and had only given me the chance to live and learn in another culture with the hope that I could bring some fresh perspectives to the way we do things here. Unfortunately, the moment I was back in the familial home their insular nature reared its ugly head: I was forbidden to contact any of the friends I'd made during my time overseas for fear that I might let slip family secrets (or something like that).*

*So, you must now be wondering why I'm suddenly able to write you this letter. The simple explanation is that I am now 'of age' and relatively free to do as I wish; I say 'relatively' as I still rely on my family to some extent and am resultantly still subject to some of their rules. However, my freedom is now such that I was able to track you down after all these years to re-establish contact.*

*I must also admit to doing a little more than merely finding out your address. To be frank, my eagerness to actually speak to you and make up for our time apart rather makes asking for a return*

*letter feel inadequate, so I took the liberty of using the resources at my disposal to organise you a little vacation: if you were to phone your boss right now she would tell you that you're on leave for the next month, and attached to this letter you will find a ticket for a flight that will take you on the holiday of a lifetime. Of course, you're perfectly welcome to ignore all of this and carry on as if you had never read my letter, but I really would dearly like to see you again.*

*There's no need to RSVP: everything will be ready for you whether you're coming or not.*

*Hope to see you soon.*

*Love from,*

*Cassandra*

Flipping the paper over, Shaun did indeed find a plane ticket for a date three days hence. Upon detaching it from the letter, he found no glue residue, no staple, no tape, no paperclip: it seemed to have merely been...affixed. The tiger frowned at the ticket, studying it without really taking in much meaning from the letters and numbers printed on it. How had Cassandra found out where he lived and worked? How had she known he'd receive the letter in time for the flight? And how, if what she said was true, had she arranged him a month's leave? He set both letter and ticket aside, deciding to defer making his decision on the matter until after he'd phoned his boss first thing the next morning.

Four days later, Shaun was touching down at his destination, a little apprehensive of the unknowns that surrounded this adventure but nevertheless ready and excited. Cassandra's home, and the location for this unexpected holiday, proved to be Magopolis, capital of Taikavia; it was a country he had vaguely heard, but no more than that. He'd taken the opportunity the lengthy flight presented to read some of the articles in the inflight magazines about Taikavia to learn a bit about the place; the pervading themes were those of wealth and insularity, both of which explained Cassandra's considerable means as well as her family's attitude towards the unfamiliar.

Speaking of Cassandra, she had outdone herself with her generosity: not only had she provided him with free flights, she had gone so far as to fly him first class. Shaun found himself far from cramped and uncomfortable as he'd been on previous voyages, but instead able to stretch out as much as he wanted in the ample legroom that separated his seat – which was more like a living room recliner than an airline seat – and indulge in the exquisite food provided by the incredibly gracious and accommodating cabin crew. Indeed, when the time came to disembark, Shaun hardly felt like he'd spent eight hours on an aircraft at all.

It was only as he was striding down the gangway into the terminal, a faint, contented smile on his face, it dawned on him that there was a flaw in Cassandra's plan: she hadn't told him where she lived or where to meet her. His confident steps slowed at this realisation, forcing those behind him to dodge past with irritable grumblings. Then it struck him that he had little choice but to hope that things would fall into place: he was a long way from home and, being short on the kind of cash he'd need, wouldn't be able to get a flight home for another month.

As the passage opened into a much wider hallway, filled with travellers, extensive foliage, and, most importantly, signage, the tiger paused to locate the plastic placard that pointed the way to the baggage claim. His eyes had just locked onto a symbol that resembled a suitcase when he felt a presence to his right and heard a throat being cleared in an attention-seeking manner. "Excuse me, sir, but are you by any chance Mister Shaun Fletcher?"

Turning, Shaun found himself looking up at a muscular buck, clad in a discreet suit and tie that did only a minimal job of disguising his physique. There was a very chauffeur-ish aura about him, something which gave the tiger a strong hint as to why he was there. "I am," he replied, the relatively tall feline somewhat unused to being in the presence of taller people, "Would I be right in thinking that Cassandra sent you to pick me up?"

"Correct, sir. Allow me," taking Shaun's hand luggage from him, the deer carried the two bags over to acquire a trolley. He then led the way down the hallway at a smart pace, pushing the cart before him.

Apart from introducing himself as Ludwig the stag's answers to Shaun's questions were curt and monosyllabic, but for the refrain of 'You will find out soon, sir' to any queries about their destination. The tiger soon abandoned the interrogation, instead walking mutely beside Ludwig to the baggage claim.

Their wait at the conveyor amounted to less than a minute, as Shaun's suitcase was the first to emerge from the mystical portal and had soon been loaded onto the trolley along with the rest of his luggage. Then they were on the move again, Ludwig leading the way to one of what Shaun assumed was many levels of parking. To the feline's surprise there were barely half a dozen vehicles dotted around the lot, but each looked large, sleek, expensive, and manned by a besuited driver. With a mounting impression of exclusivity, he followed Ludwig to black sedan whose rear windows were tinted to the point of being opaque. Just how wealthy was Cassandra?

At the cervine's insistence, Shaun seated himself in the back of the car while his luggage was loaded into the boot. He took the opportunity to gaze around at the ongoing luxury he was being provided while Ludwig was otherwise occupied. Leather seats, check. Screens built into the back of the headrests of the front seats, check. Adjustable lumbar support, check. Minibar concealed behind the central armrest, check. He even detected an unexpected warmth beneath his rump that hinted at the seats being heated. *Don't get used to it*, he told himself as his eyes followed his antlered chauffeur to the driver's door, *you'll be back to driving yourself around in a second-hand Toyota soon enough*.

"Are you ready, sir?" the deer asked, drawing his seatbelt across himself.

"Yes, thank you," Shaun replied, following suit.

Within five minutes, they had swept up the last of many ramps and out into the descending evening, the sun still peeking above the horizon. The dual-carriageway system that fed into the airport soon gave way to four lanes of motorway, down which they cruised with little to halt their progress despite the volume of traffic that was sharing their tarmac. The road was flanked on either side by dense forest, but ahead Shaun could discern the soaring skyline of a might city: Magopolis.

As with the walk through the airport Ludwig seemed ill-disposed to idle chat, but that didn't faze the tiger: he was more than happy taking in the strange new land flashing past his tinted window. Something that struck Shaun even before they'd reached the glittering spires of the metropolis that was growing ever larger in the windscreen was how new everything looked: of the vehicles he glimpsed flashing past, none of them could have been more than ten years old; and to think that his wheels would be legal to drink.

The obvious displays of the nation's widespread wealth intensified once they had left the trees behind and entered the manmade forest that was Magopolis: the buildings that soon surrounded them and their fellow travellers of the wide, well-maintained streets with their beautified medians

were as tall as any Shaun had seen in his life and at least as magnificent. However, there was a marked difference between these skyscrapers and those he'd seen before: rather than being constructed out of glass, steel, and concrete, virtually every building was predominantly some kind of pale, yellowish stone. The windows of many were arranged in columns, the often-purplish glass curving to form an arch a few metres below the roof. The designs and palettes of the architecture almost made the city look like something out of a fantasy movie, as if they were sculpted not by craftsmen, but by magic.

Onwards through the city they continued, stopping only for traffic lights. Shaun recognised a few sights from pictures he'd seen in the magazines on the plane; the feline kept himself entertained by trying to recall their names, awarding himself a point every time he had a lightbulb moment. This only lasted him so long, however, and there still seemed to be no sign of them slowing for the destination. Not wanting to be an 'are we there yet?' person, Shaun glanced at the cervine behind the wheel, then began to investigate the small screen built into the back of the front passenger seat.

The tiger had become so engrossed watching a local news broadcast that he became quite oblivious to the world outside his luxurious metal box. Only when he heard the road change from asphalt to gravel did he look up; surely this meant that they had reached their destination. For about a minute, all Shaun could see was what appeared to be a heavily-forested park on either side of the track along which they were travelling, the abundant trees obscuring what was up ahead. But then, after passing a tall, manicured hedge, the road swept up a small hill to where a vast building stood; Shaun would have described it as a mansion, but it was far more than that. In fact, it looked familiar...

"Hey!" Shaun piped up, breaking the silence which had lingered in the car for a good hour as he leaned forward in his seat to peer through the windscreen, "Isn't that the Royal Palace?"

"Yes, sir. That is where the whole Royal Family lives, including Princess Cassandra."

"Princess...Princess Cassandra?" the tiger flopped back in his seat, astounded and bewildered; never would he have thought that he would have links to any royal family. He had always put Cassandra's very obvious wealth down to being the daughter of a wealthy businessperson or an ambassador, but this revelation took things to a whole new level.

The gravel crunched beneath the limo's tyres as they approached the vast palace which seemed to loom even larger in his vision than Shaun had imagined. Ludwig did not drive up to the grand stone steps that led up to a pair of towering golden doors, however, but instead followed the curve of the road around to the right to a much more discrete entrance at the side of the building. Noticing his passenger's confused expression as he glanced in his mirror, the buck explained: "Only the Royal Family and their retainers may pass through the Grand Entrance, sir. You are required to enter as a visitor."

The limo came to a halt right in front of the far less elaborate side entrance: a pair of more normally-proportioned double doors which appeared to be of a reddish-brown wood with intricate detailing in gold leaf. Before Shaun had a chance to even reach for his door's handle, it was opened for him by a uniformed footman. He was politely waved away too from assisting in retrieving his luggage from the boot, instead turning towards the entrance.

"Is that Shaun I see?" called a familiar voice. To the tiger's great surprise, he saw a familiar matronly form standing in the open doorway. Beaming at him, Martha strode forward and enveloped the feline in a tight, warm hug. "How have you been?" she asked, now holding him by his shoulder's at arm's length, "Gosh, it's been a while, hasn't it?"

"I'm great, thanks. Trying not to get too used to all this luxury," the feline chuckled, Martha chiming in with a laugh of her own, "Why didn't you tell me I was dealing with royalty when we met?"

"Oh, honey, I would have loved to! But we were all under strict instructions not to spread the word: it was on a strictly 'need to know' basis while we were abroad. Still, you know now and, even more importantly, you can enjoy some regal hospitality now you're here," she smiled broadly at him for a moment longer, then let her grip on his shoulders fall, "Come, let's get you to Cassandra: she's been dying to see you."

"What about..." Shaun gestured to his luggage which had by now been stacked neatly on a golden-framed trolley.

"Don't you worry about that," Martha told him, steering him through the double doors, "there's a room all set up and waiting for you in the guest wing. My orders are to take you straight to Cassie, so that's where we're going now."

The ornate doors led into something like an airlock in which a pair of armed guards stood. With profuse apologies, they had Shaun step through a metal detector, then patted him down for good measure. Having been declared clear to enter, Martha took the lead once more as she guided him on through another set of double doors; no doubt the tiger's luggage would be subjected to a similar security check very shortly.

The second set of doors had opened onto what Shaun could only assume was the palace proper: the walls of the hallway were adorned with paper that was cream-coloured, textured, and patterned with yet more intricate designs in gold leaf; the ceiling was a similar colour and sported gold trimming too, the light from crystal chandeliers glittering on the burnished surfaces of the pot-plant-bearing tables and brass door handles; their footsteps were heavily muffled by a plush red carpet that made the feline feel as if he were walking along cloud tops.

One detail that struck Shaun as more odd than palatial was the height of the ceilings and doors: they were both at least twice as high as the security room they'd passed through, which he'd taken to be normally proportioned. It wasn't only the height of things that was unusual, the hallway seemed to be much wider than was necessary too. He questioned Martha about these details, "Oh, it's just how things have been designed," she replied airily, "a palace has to look the part, doesn't it? Grandeur is far more regal than cosiness, no matter how much you like it." She laughed and Shaun joined in, though he couldn't help but continue gazing around at the curious décor.

"Here we are," Martha announced after a couple more minutes of walking down the immense corridor, having stopped at one of the towering doors.

"Is this my room, then?" asked Shaun, taking another look around the hallway in an attempt to remember this important location.

"Oh, no!" the matronly bovine said, extracting a set of keys from her pocket, "your room is back down the hall a little way, I'll show you later. No, *this* is the back door to Cassandra's room...well, her part of the palace." She pushed the door open and ushered the tiger inside.

They had emerged into what appeared to be a kind of waiting area. Several ornate cushioned chairs stood along one wall, at the opposite end of which was another door. Facing these was a third door, and it was this that Martha approached.

"Cassandra? He's here!" she called through the closed portal after knocking firmly.

The sound of something being set down on a table answered, followed by an excited trill, "Send him in!"

Martha beckoned Shaun closer as she eased the door open, giving him an encouraging smile and a pat on the shoulder before she closed it behind him.

The aesthetic of the room he'd set foot in came as no surprise to the tiger: as in the hallway, cream, gold, and red were the predominant colours. Every piece of furniture he could see looked expensive, elaborate, yet sturdy as could be hoped. The one detail that caught Shaun off-guard was, again, the scale: unlike the chairs in the waiting area which were just what he was used to only more ornate, every single item in this new room was like the door that had just shut behind him: twice the size to which he was used.

His contemplation of the furniture was brought to an abrupt end by an elated cry from behind him: "Shaun!"

He turned, then felt his jaw hit the floor. Long gone was the little girl who had taken such a shine to him all those years ago. Instead, a young woman in a flowing white gown was approaching him, violet plumage gleaming in the light from the chandelier above them, the garment's fabric clinging to her broad hips, plush midriff, and generous bust. A knowing grin spread across her features as he gawped at the most obvious change in her appearance...

"Surprise!" Cassandra giggled looking down at the tiger she now loomed over, the top of his head roughly level with her upper thigh. As it seemed he was lost for words, she flung her head back and let out a hoot of laughter, looping her long, royally-downed tail around his middle. Shaun was vaguely aware of his feet parting company with the floor as if he were naught but a doll, then he was sailing through the air in its grip towards the gigantic bed on the other side of the room, facing a large window.

She settled herself on top of the lavish covers, reclining elegantly with her head propped up on her hand, all the while easily keeping the comparatively tiny tiger airborne in the coils of her prehensile draconic tail. Once she was comfortable, she set him down in front of her so she could drink in his appearance, her grin softening to an adoring smile. "God, I missed you," she said softly with a little sigh, "I'm so sorry I couldn't get in touch with you for so long. How have you been?" Shaun gawped at her as he sat there, having to look up at her face looming above him even though it was only the elevated by the length of her forearm.

Seconds ticked by and yet he remained apparently incapable of speech. To fix this, Cassandra leaned right in close until her beak was almost touching his nose. "Shaun?"

The tiger started, toppling onto his back in surprise as his brain reengaged and noticed the huge visage filling his vision. "O-Oh! S-Sorry," he stammered as she eased him back into a sitting position with one enormous hand, "I've...I've been pretty good, didn't forget you, though." He paused at this point, glancing briefly at the white-clad body stretching almost the length of the gigantic bed, then tried to pose *the* question: "How did you..."

Cassandra giggled again, relieved that he was finally speaking, "All my family are this big!" she told him enthusiastically, "Although I admit that I'm a little on the tall side at twelve feet: most of the other women are nearer eleven. If you were talking about this," she seized a handful of her still-prominent belly and gave it a little shake which caused a minor quake in both her chest and the bed on which they were resting, "royalty here are expected to be...generously proportioned; it's a

tradition I had no misgivings about upholding.” She grinned broad and winked down at her little bedfellow.

“But...but...” Shaun began, trying to find the words, “you were small when I knew you.”

“It’s all about puberty, hun: it hits my family like a ton of bricks. I’d say I was about your size within a year of when I last saw you.” She laughed afresh at the look of bewilderment on the tiger’s face, but her demeanour quickly became more serious: “You’re okay with the new me, right?” she asked, genuine concern etched all over her face, “I know it’s a big shock, and it was probably a bit mean of me not to warn you in my letter.”

Shaun peered up at her but felt a smile form on his lips as the answer came easily to him, “Of course it is. It’ll take some getting used to, though: I’m not used to being the smallest one around or giant furniture,” he chuckled, quickly feeling more at ease.

“Thank you! Thank you so, so much,” she beamed at him, then shifted to a sitting position, “Ready for the biggest hug you’ve ever had?”

Swallowing as he was newly reminded just how big Cassandra was as he found himself on a level with that not-inconsiderable tummy, he nodded and moved to haul himself to his feet. She beat him to it, though, swooping in with both enormous hands which took the liberty of seizing him under his arms and lifting him into the warmest, softest embrace he could ever have imagined experiencing. She held him against her for a long moment, rounding off the intimate moment with a squeeze which forced most of the air from his lungs in a strangled ‘ack!’

Giggling and grinning once more, Cassandra set him back on his feet so he stood a little less than a head shorter than her while she remained sitting. “Now, you’ll be meeting my family tomorrow, so there’s some etiquette and protocol I’ve got to take you through,” she told him, adjusting her gown as it had become a little twisted from her movement, “I don’t mind what you call me in private, but when anyone other than Martha is around you’ll have to call me ‘Your Highness’, ‘Your Majesty’, or whatever. Even when you’re talking about me to someone else, I have to be ‘Princess Cassandra’, understand?”

The little feline nodded his understanding, feeling a little like a child being told how to behave when meeting his extended family for the first time.

“Same goes for addressing anyone else in my family,” Cassandra added, trusting Shaun to know who they would be when he met them based on her own appearance. She watched him shift his weight from one foot to the other, clearly becoming fidgety from standing still for a prolonged period. “The other thing I need to take you through is that, as I said in my letter, my family doesn’t trust foreigners; it was a task just getting them to agree to let you visit. They only let me if I agreed to their conditions: apart from when you’re in your room, I’m not allowed to let you out of my sight and that I have to put you on the next flight home if you step out of line at all.

Shaun nodded his understanding, opening his mouth to speak but she forestalled him with a raised index finger and a rueful smile. “They don’t trust me to be able to keep a constant watch over you since you...” she coughed and gave a little snigger, “fly under my radar, so to speak,” she winked down at him as he tried not to take too much offence at the comment, “Anyway, I’m sorry I have to do this, but...” She had raised her great, feathered hand and held it above his head. With a twirl of her wrist, a loop of a shimmering, pale blue substance appeared at the tips of her fingers.

Shaun gasped, watching as the ring gradually descended towards him. His flinching betrayed his instinct to try to avoid this unknown apparition, but Cassandra's other hand had closed around his arm, holding him in place. Before he could weigh up whether or not to trust the veritable giantess the ring had settled around his neck, feeling warm and pleasantly tingly.

"W...Was that...?"

"Magic? Yes. I couldn't have done that when I met you, but much of my teenage years were spent learning how to use the magic that runs in my family; it's what we think makes us so large."

The tiger stared up at Cassandra for a moment, then ran his hands over his neck; he couldn't feel the magical collar through his fingers and he was already becoming accustomed to the tingling sensation. "What's this for?" he asked, letting his hands fall.

"Well..." Cassandra considered, then the tail he had quite forgotten about swung round from behind her, curled about his waist again, lifted him from the bed, then set him gently on the floor, "go and see if Martha's still waiting outside for me."

Confused but curious, Shaun turned and padded away across the enormous room while Cassandra shuffled across to the far side of her bed. Feeling nothing unusual, the feline stretched out his hand to grasp the golden door handle. But he couldn't. Try as he might he couldn't get his hand within six inches of it, meeting an invisible barrier at every attempt. He tried to walk closer to the door, but suddenly the collar tighten around his throat, half choking him.

And then the pressure eased. Coughing, he massaged his neck, once more unable to tell that there was anything there at all. He was briefly aware of a thumping growing stronger beneath his feet, then an increasingly familiar appendage wrapped around his middle and lifted him into the air.

"I'm so, so sorry I have to do that to you, hun," Cassandra said earnestly, her draconic tail holding him close to her eye level with great ease, "but it's the only reason my family are prepared to have you stay."

Shaun nodded, still coughing, but now rubbing her tail reassuringly with the grain of her plumage. "It's okay, at least I know not to stray from you now."

A relieved smile crossed her avian features. She exchanged the grip of her tail for that of her hands which then held him gently to her chest. "Thank you, Shaun."