

Jean walked slowly from the dim, dusty halls of the manor. The boy listened with wonder and curiosity as the greying wizard led him. Prospero explained the purpose and workings of the magical trinkets and scrolls. His cane tapped against the cold stone floor. While not old enough to need it, the runes etched into its frame made it a helpful catalyst for his abilities.

The arcane trinkets and secrets fascinated him. Though Jean was capable of minor magical tricks, he was nothing compared to the powerful mage who owned this place. Many came to Prospero seeking apprenticeship, but the wizard almost never accepted students. That he was lucky enough to be taken in, he thought was nothing short of a miracle, a golden opportunity he could not refuse.

Detailing his extensive experiments and adventures, Prospero showed off his countless creations and treasures, clearly taking pride in his accomplishments and enjoying the lavish praise Jean heaped upon him. Moving swiftly through the manor itself, he showed several arcane artifacts and desks covered with archaic study materials. When they got outside, he slowed his pace, showing creatures and findings with greater detail and pride. They walked through the courtyards and gardens, given clear view of the exotic flora and curious stone statues. They moved on to the kennels, a branch of the gardens filled with magically sealed areas to hold curious creatures from distant lands, or of his own creation.

Prospero stopped at large birdcage hanging from a post of polished, white wood. Its floor covered with leaves, the cage contained a few small branches, troughs for feed and water, and an old nest woven from string and twigs. Curiously, no animal was present in the cage, no traces to suggest one's recent removal or even a rustle of movement from some unseen creature. "Young Jean, have you any idea what once occupied this cage?" Prospero asked, actually looking at Jean for the first time since he began the tour.

"No sir," Jean answered, meekly hoping he was not yet meant to know.

"As you may realize, my extensive research and travels can be quite costly. This little bird aided my finances greatly. She laid several eggs each day, all made from the finest gold. However, my former apprentice stole the little bird," Prospero explained, casting a sharp glare towards his smaller student. "You would never consider such a thing, now would you, Jean?"

"Of course not. You can trust me, sir, I seek only to learn the mystic arts."

"That's good to hear, though I don't suppose you will have the chance," he chuckled so quietly that Jean did fully hear him. "You should know, this apprenticeship shall not always be pleasant, or even interesting."

"As is any job. Whatever you need, sir."

"Let's begin with something simple. Go fetch some food and water for this cage. You'll find it in that shed behind you," Prospero ordered, pointing to a small building with his staff. The cane brushed Jean's arm, so slightly that it seemed an accident. But a little jolt of electricity

jumped to his skin, making him jump slightly. He took a sharp breath and examined his arm as he walked for the room, finding nothing and assuming it the poke of a small thorn stuck to the base.

Entering the shed, he looked over the sacks of feed, unsure of which to use. This was likely a test of sorts. Too small to be a raptor, he ignored the cages of mice. Instead, filling the troughs with water and seed. He wondered what kind of test this could be, figuring instead that the old man simply wanted one to perform his menial tasks. Strangely, his clothes felt rather loose, too large for him. He shook off the feeling, noticing an irritating itching on his arm and side.

Ignoring it, he brought the trough over and placed it in the cage. “Now, let’s test that magic of yours,” Prospero said, placing a cup on the ground. The glass of water was filled to the brim, a small leaf floating atop the water. “Touching only the base of the cup, hold the leaf at the bottom.”

Following the command, Jean sat before the cup, smiling arrogantly at the simple task. Channeling his magic through the water, he dragged the leaf under, quickly finding it difficult as a spark of magic from his master fought to keep the leaf afloat. Hands shaking slightly, he tightened his focus, willing the leaf to the bottom and holding it. Prospero chuckled at the exertion his apprentice required for something so minor. In truth, he cared nothing for the test results, simply distracting the boy as his magic got to work changing his shape.

As his energy faltered, the leaf slowly floated upwards, jerked downwards as he administered new magic. Face red and sweat beading on his brow, the leaf slowly floated up and breached the surface. Sighing, he let go and attempted to recover his strength.

“Sorry master, I’m not very strong yet,” he said, panting. His attention no longer absorbed, he noticed his clothes far too loose on him. So much so that it could not be a mistake. “What the hell! Master, what sort of test is this?” he asked worriedly, now half his normal size. Horrible itching broke out over his body, little black needles sprouting from his flesh like hair.

“Test?” Prospero chuckled. “That what you think this is? Ha, your former abilities are unimportant now.”

“But then... what, what is this?” he asked fearfully, the needles sprouting little hairs and becoming fluffy feathers.

Sitting calmly on a bench, he gave a bemused smile to the rapidly changing boy. “Exactly what I needed. I have no use for a weak child calling himself a student. But that little bird, you could be useful as that,” he chuckled, the feathers beginning to color.

Jean clawed at his face, painfully pulling the feathers from his skin. They grew back quickly, his face and chest becoming pitch black. The now fluffy human watched in horror as his arms turned blue, and his hands and stomach became snow white.

His magic spent, he jumped in a panic and ran for the gate. Only as tall as a human knee, he stumbled and tripped on his baggy clothes. Chuckling, Prospero picked up the little human and placed him into the cage. His clothing fallen off, Jean thanked the covering feathers. Now the size of a crow, he backed away from the massive human, stopped suddenly by the smooth bars.

“Please,” he pleaded meekly, his bones feeling loose as they popped and bent into place.

“You wanted to be a part of my research, this is as useful as you can be. Certainly nobler a job than anything a simpleton like yourself could otherwise do.”

Clenching his teeth, Jean felt a pressure building at the base of his spine. Popping free, his tailbone straightened and extended, a small nub forming from the base of his back, a long fan of blue tailfeathers quickly forming on it. He fell to his hands and knees, his backbone forcing him forward as his hips realigned.

“Aaay,” he said, his voice changing as his neck thickened. Putting his hands to his mouth, he felt his teeth fall from his gums. Attempting speech only brought on more unintelligible squawks, his innards grinding like mud in a mixing drum.

“Fun bit of irony isn’t it. A magpie unable to steal bits of gold, instead giving it back to us,” Prospero said, chuckling at his own joke.

Fingers merging and arms extending, Jean whimpered at the twisting and snapping into flatter sheets. Longer feathers grew down from his arms, flushing out into full wings. He collapsed onto his side, clutching his torso in discomfort as his stomach and chest rounded into avian proportions.

His legs thinned and their skin itched, feathers falling out as scales replaced them. None of his changes hurt but felt and appeared so unnatural he could not help but flinch with each snap of bone or churn of organs.

As knees snapped backward, he felt the bones of his face pulled forward like brittle rubber. Skin pulling back, he clacked his newly formed beak and watched his feet divide into three talons. With several final snaps, his skull finished forming, granting him the rounded head of the magpie he became.

He shuddered as he felt his groin pull inwards, groaning as the region hollowed into a cavity. A warmth flooding through his insides, he felt new instincts tickling at his mind, slowly realizing that the magic had shifted him into a her.

Acting automatically, she fluttered up to her nest and nestled in. Her breath shortened, and she felt an incredible weight forming in her gut. Cooing groans escaped her beak as she strained new muscles. Pushing with all her strength she felt the solid sides of the weight passing through her. She quivered and moaned as her vent opened. Filling her with pleasure and a hint of pain, her opening stretched, and the smooth egg rubbed at her insides.

“There you are. Hope it was enjoyable,” Prospero chuckled and reached into the cage, grabbing the warm gold egg still slick with her fluids.

Remembering where she was, Jean pecked at the wizard, rage over his new form flooding him. Prospero simply pulled back his hand and chuckled, appraising the egg as the magpie flapped angrily.

Watching helplessly from the nest, Jean realized the futility of her situation. Pitiful chirps escaped her, feeling more weight welling within her. Bloated and heavy, she could hardly summon the energy to move, realizing this would be her life for years. She pleaded to the wizard, wishing at the very least not to be stuffed with so many eggs.

“Aw,” Prospero chuckled pitifully, reaching in and scratching the side of her head. She closed her eyes and accepted the contact, willing to do anything if it convinced him. “You’ll do more than just lay. Between the eggs, you’ll have breaks to fly about and enjoy the gardens,” he reassured. She chirped plaintively, looking up to him and begging wordlessly for mercy. “No, you’re right. The body of a magpie doesn’t suit all those thoughts and memories. I can ease this distress.”

She chirped excitedly at the offer, rubbing her beak against his finger affectionately. Once this was over, she swore not to use magic anymore, traumatized by the sudden shifts.

“All you need is that human mind erased. It will be so much easier without those complicated thoughts in the way,” he offered. He jumped at the words, calling in panic hopping away. It was too late, and a blue spark jumped from his finger to her head.

The spark burned her flesh and stunned her. Panicking, she closed her eyes and mentally lashed out, clinging to her memories. Coveting her former self, she felt the bolts of magic drilling into her brain. She fought against the annihilation, clutching her old thoughts like sand. But like sand, they fell grain by grain into the blank sea below her. The more that faded, the less she recalled her old self, the fewer human instincts putting value on her old life.

She no longer recalled what she had come to this place for. Her will weakening, her grip faltered, and more sand washed away. The hands which she held the sand with were gone, replaced with wings... no, they had always been wings. These confusing concepts of self and a former life grew too difficult to grasp. It was too tiring to fight for them. She knew not why she resisted against it. This place was safe and comfortable; she had eggs to lay, and maternal instincts rang strong in her little brain.

Cooing contentedly, she paced back over to her nest. Fluffing her feathers, she enjoyed the warmth and rested her beak against her crop. The nameless human chuckled, scratching beneath her beak. Eyes lacking their former keen glint, she squawked happily and felt more eggs filling her gut. Laying was a fulfilling act, and she felt a great pride for her coming clutch. Closing her eyes, she rested and waited for the time to come.