

Three dollars, seventy-six cents.

Earlier that evening, that had been how much Markus had in his cup. Now, he was limping back into the dark alleyway he called home with a nasty cut on his right leg and an empty disposable plastic cup in one hand, the other hand being used to brace himself against the wall to avoid losing balance. There was no pity from the people who robbed him. They did not care that he was homeless. They'd simply demanded he hand over the money. When he pled with them to have pity on him, explaining to them that this was all he had, they'd slashed his leg and took his money anyway, mocking him as they left.

There was no point in contacting the police. He knew that. The police had a lot on their plate already and had no real respect for the homeless themselves. At most they'd pay lip-service to trying to catch the criminals, but he knew there would be no justice. There never was for the homeless. Instead, he simply limped back to his makeshift shelter and gingerly sat down, trying his best not to aggravate his wound.

He looked up at the black night sky. He knew there were stars up there, of course, but it had been ages since he'd seen any. The city lights always obscured the night sky's starry display. Some of the light from the street lamps even reached into this very alleyway, as did the various noises of the city and the thick pollution of the cars' exhaust fumes.

In his younger days, he'd gotten greedy and decided to move to the big city to find success. Now, he couldn't stand this place. When he was living in the country, he'd heard all about the glamor and excitement of the big city. But now, he saw the ugliness behind the city's mask, the crime and corruption that could be found throughout. But there was no use dwelling on it now. The past was the past. This was his life now. It was best to just try to get some sleep.

But just as he was getting ready to lay down, he saw an unusual sight. It was a butterfly. In themselves, butterflies were rare in this city, but this was no butterfly type he'd seen before. This one had wings of many different hues, far more colorful than any butterfly he'd ever witnessed. But perhaps even more unusual, the butterfly landed on his knee, facing toward him. Markus stared back. The butterfly, for about a minute, did not budge. Nor did Markus, who was afraid of frightening the little butterfly away. Then finally, it flew up, landing atop the cardboard box that was a key part of his shelter.

He glanced up at the butterfly and, despite how horrid his situation and surroundings were, for the first time in a long while, he smiled. It was not a wide smile, but it was something. The butterfly's presence, much as he figured it would be brief, was a small source of comfort amidst the hopelessness. Markus knew the butterfly wouldn't directly improve his situation. But even so, it was a small bit of beauty and a reminder of what he missed, what he longed for.

Moving slowly, both to avoid frightening the butterfly and to avoid making his cut worse, he laid down, draped a tattered towel over himself as a blanket, and went to sleep.

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Slowly, in his dream, Markus opened his eyes and sat up. Where before he was surrounded by cold stone and steel, now he was in a warm, breezy field. Before him was a large lake, shimmering in the morning sunlight. Behind him was a single apple tree. But other than those two things, it was an endless field, stretching onward to the horizon.

He walked over to the lake, seeing in its reflection that he was still dressed in the dingy, tattered clothes he was in last night. He cupped some water in his hands. Despite being a dream, the feeling of the water on his hands and the gentle breeze were unusually vivid. He raised the water to his face and took a drink. It tasted pure and untainted. This, too, was unusually vivid for a dream.

He turned around, looking back toward the tree. He plucked an apple and took a bite. It was, perhaps, the best apple he had tasted. Or perhaps it'd simply been so long since he'd had an apple that he'd simply forgotten it had tasted so good. Either way, he leaned his back against the tree, continuing to eat the apple. But by this point, reality had intruded on his thoughts again. He now realized this was all a dream. A vivid dream, but it was still just a dream. And unfortunately, that meant he would have to return to his waking life at some point. He couldn't stay here.

Then, he noticed the familiar rainbow-colored wings of the butterfly who'd visited him last night. Just as it had last night, it was now staring at him. But unlike last night, this time the butterfly spoke. Its voice was high-pitched, but soothing, coming in louder and clearer than he would ever have expected from something so small.

"Hello, Markus," the butterfly said, "I hope you're feeling better today."

Markus looked down. He knew it wasn't 'today', but rather 'tonight'. He had nothing to look forward to in the morning. But even so, he could not deny how comfortable this dream was. Perhaps, in its own way, it would offer some respite that may make the waking world just a little bit more bearable. He looked back up toward the butterfly. "A little bit."

The butterfly lowered her wings. "You're worried about the future... aren't you?"

Markus nodded, then took another bite of the apple.

There was a pause, then the butterfly said. "You don't need to worry."

Markus shook his head. "Three dollars and seventy-six cents... That's all it took to turn me into a target." He looked down toward his wounded leg. It was no longer actively bleeding and, in this dream, didn't even hurt. But it was still there. He then looked back up toward the butterfly. "That's the world I'm going to be returning to when I wake up." He sighed. "I have nothing to look forward to..."

“Markus...” the butterfly said. “The world can be changed. It will get better. And you’ll be able to feel free and happy again.”

Markus said nothing.

“Do you believe what I have said, Markus?”

Markus paused. “...I want to, more than anything. But I can’t.”

The butterfly shook her wings, tiny sparkles of light falling from them and slowly descending. “I understand, Markus. Your spirit has been wounded, deeply and viciously, over a long time, as has the world itself.” The sparkles of light reached Markus’s leg, going into his wound and slowly closing it up as if it had never been there in the first place. “...But wounds can be healed.”

With that, the butterfly flew away, leaving Markus alone with his thoughts. He finished his apple, then had another, moving closer to the lake to enjoy its beauty. But soon after finishing his apple, in his dream, he felt sleepy. So he laid down in the comfortable grass, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

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When Markus opened his eyes again, he found himself back in the alleyway, just as he knew he would. But even so, he immediately felt as if something was very different about this morning. The cardboard box was adorned with small, multicolored feather charms, hanging from thin strings fastened to the upper lip of his cardboard box. He stood up and looked around, seeing a few polished stones of various colors around his makeshift shelter. They weren’t valuable in the monetary sense, but these two touches combined added some much-needed color and beauty.

But the strangest part of it was that he didn’t feel like this was strange at all. A small part of him knew that he should. But he didn’t want to. It felt like it had always been this way, like it was his morning routine to wake up to these beautiful decorations around his shelter. And already, from that change alone, his life felt a little bit better. In fact, he didn’t just feel better emotionally, but physically as well. He felt like he had more of a spring in his step, the aches and pains of sleeping on concrete every night nowhere to be found.

In fact, he felt like he didn’t even need to worry about getting money this morning. His empty cup no longer seemed like a concern at all. Nor, for that matter, was the money that would be collected in it. None of that mattered to him anymore. But that left a question to be answered: What would he do now? After all, it was a bright, sunny day and he didn’t want to squander it.

Well, how about heading to the library? It had been far too long since last he’d read a good book. He occasionally had to read a manual or the like, of course. At least, before he became homeless, though he

was beginning to think of his shelter as more of a home than a mere shelter. And so, it was settled. He would go to the library, then come back with a book or two to read.

He began walking, his leg no longer wounded and his stomach no longer feeling empty. In fact, it felt like he'd had quite a large breakfast. One of his new antennae, long and green with small, bulbous, yellowish tips, twitched in excitement at the idea of a visit to the library. A small part of him realized that he didn't used to have antennae, but even so, it felt right, like the way it had always been.

When he emerged from the alleyway, he beheld the city around him. There was still plenty of concrete, but now the buildings also seemed to have more wood accents before. There were more potted plants decorating the fronts of buildings and more color to liven up the gray cityscape. Even the air seemed a bit fresher. There were still cars around, but they didn't give much exhaust at all. In addition, the cars were softly illuminated underneath with colors that varied by vehicle.

The people, too, had changed. Some were developing claws, some horns, some the beginnings of wings, and a few were even going barefoot as they developed paws or hooves. Just like Markus, nobody seemed to pay these changes any mind. Indeed, just as it was with Markus, it felt like just the way things have always been.

In fact, Markus himself wasn't wearing any shoes now. His fingernails and toenails were slowly reshaping themselves. Meanwhile, his nose and mouth were gradually pushing forward from his face. As this was happening, not only were the people around him changing, but so too was the environment. It felt more vibrant now. It still definitely felt urban, but now there were more trees along the way. The air was quite fresh and now the cars didn't have exhaust pipes at all, or even wheels. All of them were hovering above the polished cobblestone street, kept in the air by the enchantments they were imbued with.

Instead of electronic bulbs with glass casings, now the lamps were large, enchanted quartz crystals. Despite never technically having experienced it before, Markus could vividly remember how beautiful they looked at night when they were magically lit up. As shimmering green scales were starting to form on his newly-formed muzzle, he reminisced on how the lights would reflect on his scales, causing them to look all the more pretty. And in the center of the local park, there were a bunch of multi-hued crystal lamps. Standing in the center of those was truly a wonderful sight to behold, both for him and for onlookers. It was a mental image that grew more vivid as more of his body became covered in green scales, lighter on his belly but otherwise a fairly consistent shade.

He sniffed the air, his sensitive nose detecting a variety of wonderful smells. He quite liked this part of the city. A nice elven lady had a bakery nearby. Its windows were always open. On the frames of the windows were mystical runes, enchanted to keep bugs and foul weather out, as well as to help amplify the scents that passed from the bakery to the outside world. Nearby as well was the home of a family of kitsunes who had a well-tended garden of a wide variety of wonderful-smelling flowers. And a bit

farther down was the park. Oh, the wonderful smells of the flora there. Oh, the wonderful memories she had there, amidst both the visitors and the abundant plantlife...

There was a rhythmic clacking as she walked, the sound of her newly-formed claws against the polished stone walkway underneath. She could feel the cool, mid-morning breeze against her body through her scales. She was not wearing clothes of any sort now. Why bother, after all? Her own internal magic protected her from the any hard temperatures. And it's not like she had anything down there to hide. Fairy dragons were genderless, after all, even if most people referred to them as female due to their feminine voices and appearances. She didn't mind at all, though.

She gazed upon the library as she approached it. In a way, it almost resembled a palace, with tall spires and fancy gold-colored trim accenting its white marble stone exterior. She could see lights shining within. They were bright yet soft, most of them white but a few of them of varying different colors. Though the white lights were there to better read by, the colored lights were there to give each of the library's separate sections its own unique color, both for aesthetic appeal and to help visitors find their desired section more easily.

The lack of shirt made it much easier for her new wings to grow from her back. They were small and fully black at first. But slowly, they grew fuller, an intricate pattern of pale blue and green forming within the black outline of her wings, giving her wings a look akin to stained glass. When they were fully formed, she had a pair of large, beautiful butterfly wings behind her. As they moved, they left sparkles of light behind that floated lazily through the air before fading away. And fortunately, the large oak doors into the library were large enough that she didn't have to worry about moving her big wings to get through the doorway. The doorway was plenty big enough, almost intimidatingly big for someone as short as she had become, now a mere 3' tall.

When she walked inside, she was greeted with many things she hadn't seen in quite some time. Indeed, it'd been too long since she'd been to the library. The carpet underneath was a deep blue color, imbued with magical sparkles that shimmered around her. The bookshelves reached all the way up to the ceiling – far too high to reach most of the books without assistance – and the shelves were lined with all sorts of books of all shapes and sizes. Some were leather-bound, some were simply paper, some were lined with gems and had fancy pearlescent colors, and some even occasionally moved, as if seeking the attention of any potential readers who might be near.

With all these books to choose from, how could she possibly choose? There were so many that looked so very interesting to her, after all! But she knew that the library was enchanted. She knew that it could lead her to a book she would love. And so, she took a deep breath and relaxed, letting the enchantment read her desires. Slowly, the shimmering sparkles of the carpet swirled around her, before forming in a long path, weaving between the various bookshelves. She calmly walked along this path through the massive library, before finally the path came to an end. Then, as she stood at the end of the path, a book slipped free from a bookshelf, gently floating down into her waiting hands.

The lights around her, in the form of illusory white and gold-colored flames, indicated that she was in the history section. The book she now held was about the legendary hero Alzahar, a cunning and charismatic gryphon who was vital in ending the war between his homeland and a clan of dwarves by defeating the lich who he'd discovered had placed the dwarves under mind control. Indeed, she'd been curious about this tale ever since she'd heard about it. Why had she waited so long to read about it?

And so, carrying the book, she walked over to a nearby comfy chair, a dark red lined with gold color, and climbed up onto the seat. For a taller being such as an elf, sitting in a chair such as this would have been a trivial matter. But for Marcius, being so small, she had to exert a bit more effort to get up there. But it was worth it, given just how comfortable these chairs were. Plus, unlike most elves and other such beings who would merely sit in such a chair, she could instead lay on her back, folding her legs and resting her head against the arm of the comfy chair. Then, she opened the book, laid it on her legs, and began to read.

Even as the book was just starting, already it was proving to be a tale just as gripping as she thought it would be, perhaps even more than that. As she read, occasionally she would shift position. Sometimes she would shift her legs, especially earlier in the reading session when her tail was growing in, requiring her to move her legs a bit to make room. When the tail was fully formed, it was as long as her body up to her neck, going from thick at the base to a pointed tip. After a bit, a smooth, round pearlescent white gem formed on the tip, attached there as a part of her tail, which gently wiggled between her feet as she got to a particularly interesting and happy part of the story.

As she read, she continued to slowly shrink. Soon, she found herself no longer needing to keep her legs folded in order to properly fit lying down in the chair. Even so, she kept her legs folded for a bit to help prop the book up on her legs as she was reading. But that quickly became problematic as well. Not only was she gradually shrinking down, but her legs were reshaping themselves, becoming shorter and stouter. Soon, they were so short that the book was in danger of tipping back and falling at her feet.

Marcie sat up and picked up the book, having a bit of trouble due to how awkwardly big the book was for her now. Then, she laid it down open in front of her, before laying on her belly. She rested her cute little forepaws on the pages. Her paws still had opposable thumbs, allowing her to grasp things fairly well, but her fingers were shorter. Her feet, meanwhile, were now cute little hindpaws with three clawed toes each. The soles of her paws were colored the same pale green as her belly scales.

She continued shrinking as she read, occasionally swishing the tip of her tail or casually kicking her feet as she read. Hours passed by as she read, too enraptured by the book to realize how much time had passed. But then, she heard heavy footsteps nearby, muffled by the carpet. Looking over, she saw a familiar face: the head librarian, a minotaur named Kalren, dressed in his traditional midnight blue robes.

"Well, there's a face I haven't seen in a while. It's good to have you back here, little Marcie," the minotaur said softly, walking over. Indeed, Marcie had now finished shrinking and, whereas Kalren stood

at an impressive 8' size, Marcie was now merely 1' tall. Even so, she was not afraid of him. This was the minotaur who used his inherited fortune to build this library for the public, then established a charity to reach out to impoverished children to help teach them to read and write.

On a personal level, they had spoken many times when she'd first moved into the city. When she'd first moved out of her home glade and into the city, she was terrified, uncertain what to do or where to go. After all, the fairy dragon life was so simple and serene. The various tales she'd heard about the city weren't enough to prepare her for all the activity, all the people, and all the stunning sights of the big city. But when she fled into the library, the two of them met for the first time and, with his kind and gentle demeanor, he quickly earned her trust. He helped her to adapt and be comfortable in the big city. He'd even provided what she needed to set up her first home. It was a very simple home at the time, but it was something she would never forget.

Kalren leaned down next to the chair, scritchng the side of Marcie's neck with his thick, hoof-like fingertips, eliciting a contented musical trill from the cute little fairy dragon. "I saw you come in quite some time ago. Hopefully you haven't forgotten lunch again. Have you?"

Marcie blushed under her scales. She had forgotten to do exactly that, so wrapped up in her reading as she was. In fact, looking out a nearby window she saw that the sky was beginning to darken. It was definitely well past lunchtime now. "Yeah... I kinda did..."

Kalren chuckled softly. "Don't worry about it. I could give you some food to take home with you, if you'd like. If you're ready to check out, that is."

Marcie yawned and stretched, then stood up. "Yeah, I think I should start heading back home now."

"Alright. Let's get you checked out, shall we?" Kalren picked up the book, then pulled out a simple bookmark and placed it in the book before closing it, before leading the way to the front desk. In one fluid motion, Marcie leapt forward and spread her wings, gliding forward and dropping a bit before flying upward again, easily keeping pace with Kalren, her wings leaving glittery motes of ephemeral light behind as she flew.

At the front desk was an elf, a black cat, and a snowy owl, each with their own spot at the desk. Next to each of them was a computer. The elf had the traditional mouse and keyboard, while the two animals a metal stand in front of each of them, upon which was a small crystal ball with a magical circle engraved around them. Kalren set down the book in front of the owl. "Marcie would like to check out."

"Oh? This is Marcie?" the owl said, tilting his head as he looked at her. "I've heard good things about you from Kalren. You live up to the beauty he spoke of, that's for certain," he continued, causing Marcie to blush.

The owl leaned forward, touching his forehead to the small crystal ball. The magic circle lit up a bright cyan as the crystal ball began translating the little owl's mental commands into mouse and keyboard inputs. Even one so technologically illiterate as Marcie knew about these little magical devices, due to how ubiquitous they were. When computer technology first emerged, there were only keyboards to interface with them. For races such as elves who had hands of the right size and shape for them, keyboards worked great. Even some other races, such as the gryphons, could make do with what they had. It was them for whom the phrase "hunt-and-peck" was coined, after all. But for races such as kitsunes or certain familiars, who had to rely on paws, computer usage was very inconvenient. Since then, accessibility for the various races had made leaps and bounds. These devices were the not quite as quick to use as a mouse and keyboard, but they were an incredibly helpful development for the races who needed them.

One such race, to the degree they could be considered a single race, was the familiars. Given how long-lived they were compared to their wild counterparts, it wasn't uncommon for a familiar to outlive their master. Throughout history, these "orphaned familiars" would take up various jobs, often scholarly ones due to their former masters being bookish by their very nature as wizards. And as computers grew more common, so did the familiars' need for them in such work.

The owl leaned back away from the device and looked toward Marcie. "All done. It'll be due back on May 23<sup>rd</sup>. Have a nice evening and remember, we're always open; nights, weekends, and holidays."

Marcie nodded and flew up onto the counter. At her size, it would be very awkward to carry such a big book by mundane means, if she could do it at all. But luckily for her, she wouldn't have to rely on mundane means. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, feeling some of the mystic energy flow through her body and into the crystal on her tail, which began to glow with a brilliant white light. Then, the white light dispersed into many smaller lights of various vibrant colors. She opened her eyes as the lights reshaped themselves into small butterflies made of light. The butterflies fluttered up to the book and surrounded it. Then, the book began to levitate, held up by the magic stored in the butterflies that fluttered around it.

Kalren leaned down and opened a small metal box near the desk, pulling out a large sandwich. He gently pulled out some lettuce from the sandwich, then placed the rest of it back in the box and closed it back up. He then handed the lettuce to Marcie. "Some food to go. Now, remember to wait until you're outside, alright? There's no eating allowed in the library outside of the staff rooms."

Marcie nodded. "Thank you," she said, taking the lettuce in one forepaw before hopping up and flying toward the door, looking back and waving with her free forepaw as she did so. "I'll see you all later," she said before flying out the doors, which were now enchanted to open up automatically whenever someone came close. Trailing behind her were the rainbow-hued magic butterflies, the book gently hovering between them.

Marcie began her flight home as the golden light of the setting sun helped to accentuate the beauty of the various buildings around her, which were constructed mostly from a mix of wood, metal, and polished stone of various sorts, with occasional colorful accents. As she began munching happily on the lettuce she'd been given, she passed by a sharp-dressed ratfolk giving out free samples of a special wine made from a fruit that grew on Witherwood trees, which she politely declined. She remembered trying Witherfruit before, finding it to be too spicy and too bitter for her tastes, though to be fair her kind were notorious lightweights when it came to any form of spicy foods.

She continued on, floating elegantly through the air. Just as she was finishing up her lettuce, the quartz lamps came on. Soon after that, the sun had lowered out of sight, the stars beginning to make themselves visible in the night sky. After all, all of the races inhabiting this town could see just fine with low light, so the city didn't need to create much light pollution. As she floated down the sidewalk, she noticed a family of kitsunes standing in front of an apartment building, the father demonstrating gently waving a forepaw as he demonstrated a simple illusory flame spell in front of the children, while their mother described the casting process in detail. In the middle of the explanation, one of the children interrupted, pointing a paw at Marcie and asking "When can we learn that spell, mommy?"

Soon, Marcie arrived back home in the alleyway. What awaited her was no mere shelter. It was a small wooden home, decorated with a varied assortment of vibrant potted plants, shiny and colorful stones and gems, and other pretty things that she saw fit to decorate with. The wood itself was painted with various shades of green, blue, and purple. The cup was still there, but it was no simple plastic cup. It was an ornately-carved wooden cup, within which was a large amount of amber-colored liquid. This was nectar from one of the plants near her home, a magical plant that produced so much pollen that it routinely dripped excess. Fortunately, its pollen was highly nutritious and delicious, especially to fairy dragons. For this reason, the glade she came from was filled with them. She even brought a seed with her when she came to the city, which is how she had such a plant now.

She took a drink from the cup, her tail momentarily lighting up in bliss as she tasted the sweet nectar. Then she set the cup back down and headed into her home. It was a very simple home, so much so that some might even compare it to a doghouse, but that suited her just fine. Fairy dragons didn't require much, after all. Inside the small one-room house was a large purple cushion and a bouncy red ball. While some people occasionally expressed confusion as to how she avoided boredom while at home with so little in her home, each time she would explain that she didn't spend much time at home. Much of her time was spent in places such as the park or other interesting locations. In a way, her home was more of a bedroom than anything else.

She laid down in her home, the butterflies following her inside and vanishing, causing the book to gently land on the cushion. She then opened the book. While some of the plants outside her home held magical energy that caused them to faintly glow, it wasn't enough for her to read by inside her home. At her mental command, the tips of her antennae began glowing a pale yellow, lighting up the inside of her home.

But before she could continue reading, she noticed something rainbow-colored fluttering past the doorway to her simple wooden home. Curious, she closed the book and peeked out, getting a better look at the rainbow-winged butterfly flying off into the night sky. She stood in silence for a bit, watching the butterfly fly away until she could see it no longer. Then, after a few seconds more, she finally spoke in a whisper, knowing in her heart that the butterfly would hear her words.

“Thank you... Thank you so much...”