

As he walked through the lobby of the abandoned Verite Theater, Celsius was stopped by an usher.

"Can I see your ticket?" she asked.

Celsius was caught off guard, but the hyena girl in a red cap and jacket didn't bat an eye at the ruined posters, or the splintered boards piled up near the concession stand, or the fact that chunks of the theater doors were missing. She didn't even notice that he didn't have a ticket.

"Right this way," she said.

With an arm behind Celsius's back, she swept him forward through the doors and into the ruined theater hall.

Celsius had been combing through unsolved, odd crimes for something to investigate. He had to put work into making a name for himself as a vigilante. 'Little brown cat with ice powers' was not a marketable superhero identity, so it came down to research and legwork. What he'd found was a number of thefts—cellophane, light bulbs, fabrics, a Halloween costume store, video equipment—that all had similar MOs. They'd all involved drivers who'd fallen asleep and had no memory of what happened afterwards.

The thefts were spread out over months; if you weren't looking for connections, you might not have pieced together that someone was stealing supplies for a stage show. And in Empire City, that meant it was time to go digging around in old theaters to figure out who was taking all this stuff, and what their plans were.

"Hey, I've got some questions for...you?" Celsius said. He whirled around, looking behind him, but the usher was gone.

Someone threw the breaker for the lights, and the theater lit up, pouring light down onto the right side of the stage. The whole stage had been repaired and re-finished. It stood out, almost unreal and pristine against the rest of the abandoned theater. The red velvet curtains on the right side ruffled.

"And now, for the very first time," boomed a woman's voice over the speaker system, "the amazing, the mysterious, the lovely, Talia Tsannarova!"

A track of cheers and applause played through the speakers. Celsius was ready to charge up to the stage when the usher came up right behind him and pushed him forward.

"Please sit down, sir, the show's about to start," she said.

She sounded like the announcer, but without the affected booming tone. Celsius felt suspicious.

"I'm not sitting down until you—oof!" Celsius was cut short by the hyena shoving him into a seat. She pulled down a bar that clicked as it settled into his lap. A row of ruined seats had been replaced with seats from a roller coaster, complete with safety bar.

Celsius squirmed around and lunged for where the hyena had been, but she was gone again, without a trace, while the applause rumbled on above Celsius's head.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and gentlemen dressed like ladies, give your best big Empire City welcome tooooo...Talialia!" said the announcer, who was definitely the usher.

The curtains where the lights were focused burst open, and Talia Tsannarova strode out, heels clicking against the polished wood.

Her black boots glistened from her tall heels all the way up to mid-thigh where they stopped, leaving a gap of fur before her black shorts. Her tuxedo top fell in a ruffle around her waist, dipping down in a swallow tail in back, and buttoned up to the midline of her chest. The shoulders were sharp and padded, and the sleeves ended just above her elbows. Beneath the tuxedo top was a white shirt, buttoned up with a black bowtie, and with frilly cuffs hanging out of the ends of the tuxedo's sleeves.

On her head, she wore a top hat. Her blonde hair spilled down in thick, straight locks across her shoulders. And she was definitely, one-hundred-percent, the same girl as the usher.

"Thank you, thank you everyone!" she said. The recorded applause ended with a loud click, like a cassette popping out of a tape player. "It's so great to be *hee-hee-heere!*" A squeal snuck into her words. She pulled her lips tight in a grin and bared her fangs. "You came here to see some magic, so let's get right to the show. Now, where's my wand?"

Talia theatrically patted the faux-pockets of her tuxedo, then turned around like she might have dropped it. "Anyone found a wand?" she asked the nearly-empty room.

"Let me go! What are you trying to do?" Celsius shouted. The safety bar was frosted over from his attempts to freeze it off, but his ice powers could only do so much.

"Oh, I think someone might have found it!" Talia said, hopping off the stage and striding up to Celsius's seat.

"Get this thing off me or I'll freeze you sohh—" he began. A sudden ache in his nose cut him off. "Sahhh," he tried again, squinting. Talia reached forward, grabbing something solid sticking out of his nostril. With one quick motion, she pulled her wand free from his nose.

Celsius's eyes watered and his jaw hung slack. His brain needed a moment to chew on the sudden sinus pressure of a wand appearing in his nose. Talia spun the wand in her fingers to her left, then to her right, sending out little sprays of sparks. Then, with a tip of her wand, she vanished from in front of Celsius and appeared up on the stage again.

"Now it looks like we're *ready-hee-hee!* For my first trick, I'm going to show you the fine art of transmogrification, so can I get a volunteer from the audience?" Talia leaned forward, shading her eyes from the lights, peering into the empty room. Celsius banged his thighs against the bar, trying to lift it up so he could wiggle himself free.

"Yes, you! In the jacket! Come on up here!" Talia flicked her wand, and Celsius flinched like it was going to hit him in the eye. Suddenly, he was no longer locked into the seat, but now on the stage, standing next to Talia.

"Now, say your name for the audience!" Talia said, patting Celsius on the shoulder, turning him toward the empty seats.

"It's Celsius. And you'd better tell me what you're up to, or I'm going to put this place on ice," he said. Finally got a chance to use that line.

"Celsius! Great name," Talia said, wiggling the tip of her wand at him like it was a microphone. With a push, a tube of lipstick popped from the tip, and she dashed it across Celsius's lips, giving him a quick coat of scarlet red. "And that's some great lipstick, too."

Celsius reflexively reached for his mouth, making a ruby-lipped scowl. But his hands stopped behind his back, clinking softly. Talia grabbed the chain linking his handcuffs and gave them a tug.

"See, cuffed, nice and tight. And the keys—" She reeled her fist back, then flung the keys out into the room. He tried to follow the glittering steel, but lost sight of it over the seats. "Now, without removing those handcuffs, I'm going to change his clothes *completely-hee-hee!*"

Talia's cackle, sharp and bright right in his ear, sent a chill through Celsius. She clapped a hand on his shoulder and spun him with all her strength. Celsius dug his heels against his own momentum, but with his hands behind his back, he had to bend over to keep his balance. Talia flipped her wand from one hand to another and shouted, "Alakazam!"

Celsius's feet slipped out from under him. His balance had suddenly changed. He fell onto his side, bent over, kicking. Each kick flashed in the light. His sparkly, red high heels shimmered every time he moved them.

"Look at that! Isn't it amazing?" Talia said, grabbing one of his ankles and hauling it up into the air.

"Get off!" he shouted, kicking out at her. She dodged the stiletto heels.

"What goes well with heels? One, *two-hoo-hoo*, three!" She rolled her wand up the cat's leg. Below the wand, a crisscrossing pattern of fishnet stockings climbed through his fur. The thread tickled against his skin as it climbed, and though it disappeared beneath his pants, he could still feel it working all the way up to form a garter belt around his waist. Panties, too.

Celsius flushed red behind his scowl. The handcuffs behind his back were flecked with white crystals of ice. They flaked off into the air as he tugged at the chain, hoping the cold would make the metal brittle.

Talia walked behind him, offstage where he couldn't see. In the time she was gone, he furiously tried to break open the handcuffs and climb back to his feet, but he was stuck. But maybe he could knock the crazy hyena out somehow.

Talia returned just a moment later, shaking out a long rectangle of red velvet. "You ever wonder how to make a dress?" she asked the empty theater. "With magic, it's as easy as a wave of the wand. Let me show you." She laid out the fabric on the stage. She walked up to Celsius laying on the ground and gave him a quick kick on the shoulder to push him over. He tumbled onto the velvet. Talia grabbed the edge of the fabric and flung it over him, then quickly rolled it up around his torso, wrapping him up from his shoulders to his thighs like she was rolling up a rug.

Talia hauled Celsius back up to his feet, holding him while he wobbled on his heels. He bucked his head at her, trying to headbutt her. But Talia was still too quick. She stepped back and grabbed Celsius's hair in response. "Kalamazoo," she said, tapping his head with her wand. His hair spilled out, forming thick bangs and a tight, straight cut that fell down to his chin.

"Now, let's make a dress. Abracadabra!" she said, stepping away from him and swishing her wand in an arc through the air. The fabric compressed in on itself with a sound like a whole orchestra playing a note all at once. In one swift motion, the velvet became a dress, shimmering as he moved, clinging to his body but squeezing his stomach in particular. His jacket, his shirt and pants, they had vanished, and now the only thing covering his fur was this dress. It was shaped just like the fabric rolled around him—sleeveless, with a neckline across his chest, ending halfway down to his knees.

Talia gave Celsius a slap on the back hard enough that he stumbled forward. "Now that our lovely volunteer is in a dress, what should we do to him next?" Celsius turned to glare at Talia, but she was gone, leaving only the sound of footsteps. Celsius turned around, looking for her. As he turned back to face the theater, he saw her sitting out in the seats, wearing a white dress, fur coat, and pearl necklace.

"Ooh, make him into a girl, darling!" Talia shouted out, putting on her best snobbish voice.

"Screw this," Celsius grumbled. If she was in the seats, she'd have trouble getting to him in time. He booked it toward the stairs off the stage, clacking in his heels, arms still cuffed behind his back. He made it down to the aisle before getting clotheslined by the hyena's arm.

While he laid panting and wheezing on the ground, she grabbed him by the neck of his dress and hauled him back up to the stage, making sure he hit his ass on every step of the stairs.

Aching from both ends, Celsius laid on his side where Talia dropped him. She put a black heel on top of his stomach and put her weight on it until he whined.

"You heard the *lady-hee-hee*. Let's make you a girl," she said.

Celsius tried to twist away from Talia's foot, but her hands were on him again in an instant, grabbing him and hauling him to his feet.

"I'll start from the bottom," she said, snapping her wand at Celsius's ass right below where his hands were cuffed. He yelped, arched forward, and nearly stumbled off his heels. His skin stung hot and tight and squeezed against the dress as he squirmed. His knuckles and the backs of his fingers pushed down on his growing ass, trying to stuff it back into the dress somehow. His unremarkable rear was getting turned into something that he might even call cute...if it wasn't his own.

Celsius knotted his fingers together. He aimed a spray of frost right at Talia's face. Even though he could only hear her behind him, he aimed the best he could. Anything to distract her for long enough to make a break for it.

Instead of the sharp gasp of someone whose face fur was freezing over, though, he heard Talia's deep-breathed, chest-heaving laugh coming from far lower than he'd expected. She was crouched down low, looking at his fishnet-clad legs. She swung her wand from side to side, giving one thigh a smack, then the other, before standing.

"Not very polite, trying to freeze me in front of our audience," she said, mock-sternly, putting on a show for absolutely no one.

His knees trembled. Fluffy pins-and-needles ran in broad sweeps across his skin. The same magic she'd used on his butt sunk into his legs. The fishnet stockings dug into his fur, causing it to bunch up at the corners where the fabric slid against the follicles. His thicker legs fit more tightly in the stockings, but as a trade-off, they cut a thick, leggy figure..

"Take a look at those gams, ladies and gents!" Talia said, grabbing a calf and lifting it into the air, forcing Celsius to bend at the knee and turn-hop on one heel. She presented his leg sideways to the empty theater and ran her fingers up the back of his thighs. Her claws plucked at the fishnet. Celsius bit his makeup-coated lip and tried not to gasp. His thick, rounded thighs also happened to be sensitive to the touch, and Talia's claws were an electric knifepoint that left him hot and tingling.

Talia hit a small pedal taped to the stage floor with her foot. Over the speakers, the sound of applause and wolf whistles played. Even though it was only recorded, it still made Celsius's cheeks flush red.

Talia dropped the cat's foot and brandished her wand again. Celsius leaned forward, ready to lope away again, but a sudden tightness around his stomach knocked the wind out of him and dragged him back. Talia held onto her wand with both hands, leaning back as if it was attached to the end of an invisible rope. Celsius was unable to move forward, because that unseen rope was pulling right around his waist.

"Excuse me, mister *voluntee-hee-hee-heer*," she said. She kept both hands firmly on the wand as she set the sole of her shoe against the small of his back. "We're not done yet."

Talia pulled on her wand, hard. Now the force on Celsius wasn't so much an invisible rope but invisible laces digging at his waist. He could almost feel the whalebone and velvet of a corset wrapping around him, though there was nothing there but the dress.

With each pull, Talia pushed back with her foot. Celsius's waist was slowly drawn tighter, squeezing his stomach and driving air out of his lungs that he would have used for shouting. Instead, he wheezed out as his waist collapsed inwards.

By the time Talia 'let go', she hadn't pulled his waist down to waspish proportions, but it certainly looked like he was wearing a corset underneath the dress. Either that, or he took a lot of effort to make sure not a single pound of weight had ended up on his midsection, while inexplicably keeping his ass and hips heavy and broad.

"Time to jack up the front end!" Talia said. She shoved her wand between his shoulder blades and twisted it up and down like a lever. Swirling, tingling unease ran down his spine and swelled up into his stomach. It was like vertigo and all the hair on his body standing on end at once.

Then his chest swelled forward. And then Talia cranked her wand into his back again. Another surge forward, with new weight that bounced and shifted as he moved. The stretchy dress was eager to cling to whatever Celsius had to offer, and it had followed his waist inward. Now it was only too happy to stretch around his growing bosom.

"Stop it right now!" he shouted. He tried to pull away, but the grip Talia had on her wand kept him from twisting away, like the wand was bolted to his spine. Another crank, and he had a pair of breasts that were nice, a little understated, but a solid handful all the same.

"Look, these are fine, just stop," he said, hoping if she wouldn't stop entirely, maybe she would at least go easy on him. She didn't. Instead, she started another of her heaving laughs and cranked the wand four times.

Celsius's complaint was washed out by a sudden groan and shudder as his breasts bulged forward. His snug dress supported them, but it was just stretchy enough to cause the shimmering, sparkly fabric to glisten and show off the points of his stiff nipples.

A quick wrench of her wand sideways, and his shoulders pulled inward, losing what modicum of masculine broadness they might have had to begin with. With his new, slighter frame, there wasn't much left to his body to suggest he was male.

"Geez, lady, you're nuts!" Celsius snapped. He stumbled away from her, whirling around to face the hyena. A bright stage smile stretched across her face.

"*Yeah-hah-hah!*" Talia giggled. She struck a sudden pose and aimed her wand at him. "Abracadabra!"

"No, cut it ouuu—" Celsius began to say, before his voice rose up like a helium balloon. "Oh my gawd," he squeaked, his voice girlish and shrill and with a little drawl. "If you don't fix this in five seconds, I'm gonna—!"

Talia winked and wiggled her wand. Celsius felt his voice squeak away from him, but it wasn't because she was changing his voice again. It was something rose up, twisting deep in his gut, down between his legs. His knees clacked together and he bent over. His hand rushed down between his legs and groped at thin air for something that was quickly retreating. His jaw dropped and he let out a high-pitched whine. This crazy hyena had turned him into a girl.

Celsius looked up and saw the wild glimmer in Talia's eyes again as she shook out a huge white sheet. "And now that I've made a girl—presto changeo, watch her disappear!" she said, throwing the sheet at Celsius.

The white covered his face and he felt like he was falling, unable to tell direction or speed or where he was at all. And then he was in the dark, laying on something, and he couldn't move. The handcuffs were gone, but his arms were pinned to his sides. His eyes had almost adjusted to the darkness when, with a click, a brass lamp with a green shade flicked on.

The lamp lit up the immediate area: the leather couch he was on, the empty armchair, and the wood floor. He could see he had been buckled into a straitjacket. And if he squinted, he could make out a clothes rack in the shadows, and then beyond that, the curtains that divided the front of the stage of the Verite Theater from the backstage.

There was a click of heels, then a rustling of clothes. Someone stepped between Celsius and the lamp. In a tweed suit, wearing round eyeglasses, a moustache resting on the tip of her muzzle, Talia sat down in the armchair. It was definitely Talia, no doubt about it, but when she spoke, she put on the most obvious fake German accent he'd ever heard, even if he didn't factor in the way she was trying to talk in a low tone to sound like a guy.

"Good evenink, miss. Do you know vhy vee ah here?" she asked, picking up a notebook.

Celsius squirmed on the leather couch, baring his teeth, wild-eyed. He was not a 'miss', no matter what this insane girl did to him.

"Because you cuffed me and dragged me around and now I'm in a straitjacket so just let me go. I don't care, do whatever crazy stuff you want with whatever you stole! I'll leave you alone!"

Talia tapped her pen to her gray fake mustache. "Eenteresting. And vhy do you blame me for zis?"

Celsius blew up. "Because it's you! I can *hear* you changing costumes. If that's supposed to be a disguise, it doesn't even make sense. I can tell you're a girl!"

Talia scribbled something on her pad. "Mmm, yes, so I am not who I zay I am? Who am I zen?"

He closed his eyes and tried to remember her full name. If that even was her name, which it probably wasn't. "Talia. Talia Tsannarova, miss insane hyena magician lady!"

Talia tried to keep a straight face, but her compulsive laughter pulled her lips back in a big grin. "*Indee-hee-heed*. I remember zis girl. You haff told me about her before," she said. "Und you zaid she also vas und usher? And in ze audience?"

Celsius scowled at her. "Yeah, because she—because you keep changing clothes!"

"Mmm," Talia said, and nodded slowly. "So everyone iz zis Talia Tsannarova, yes? Are you also her?"

"No, obviously," Celsius said. "Because I'm a guy. Until you changed me, that is. And I'm a superhero, so even if I'm not a big star, someone's going to notice that you kidnapped me eventually."

Talia set her pen down. She lifted her glasses from her nose, wiped them on the sleeve of her jacket, and put them back on. "I belieff I have a diagnozis. You are presenting symptoms of ze Capgras delusion, believing people are not who zey claim to be. In technical terms, you are...batty."

Talia turned her notepad around, showing Celsius that she had scribbled in the word 'BATTY!' surrounded by spirals and swirly-eyed smiley faces.

"Und now, let me get zee nurse," she said.

She stood from her seat and left the light. Her footsteps trailed off to the clothes rack. While she ruffled through her clothes, he had a chance to slip out of her grasp. He strained against the buckles of the straitjacket, but even if he still had all his modest male strength, he couldn't have broken free. His new body was palpably more delicate, especially thanks to that pinched-in waist that gave him such an hourglass figure. He stopped trying to brute force it, worried he might strain something.

His lipstick-coated lips bared in a snarl, he summoned up as much ice around his hands as he could. The crystals poked through the thick fabric around his hands. He shuffled his shoulders back and forth, to grind the ice against the straitjacket, in hopes that the crystals would tear a hole in it. But Talia was already coming back. Her white stockings and short skirt caught the light, wearing a tight-cut nurse's uniform and cap, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"Talia, get the hell away from me!" Celsius snapped, trying to slam his shoulder into the couch to intimidate her. Maybe he could try to headbutt her again.

"Take it easy. It's me, remember? Nurse Sweets," she said, pointing to the nametag on top of her chest.

Celsius snapped his teeth angrily, trying to wiggle away from her. She had her hand on his shoulder, holding him down, forcing a plastic mask down over his muzzle. She snapped the strap back behind his neck.

"This is gonna help you calm down," Talia said. Celsius craned his head to see her hand on a gas valve, seeing her turn it with a creak that ran up through the tubes connected to the mask. He could smell something sweet, but he wasn't sure if it was the gas or just his imagination.

The hyena's claws stroked through Celsius's chin-length, soft hair. "You're batty, and we're gonna fix you."

Celsius would have complained about her using that word so much, but she was crazy. What was the point?

"Now, are you a guy or a girl?" she asked.

"I'm a guh—" Celsius began to say, before a tickle at the bridge of his nose made him stop with the word stuck halfway down his tongue. He breathed in sharply, inhaling more sweet smell. "I'm a *ghee-hee-hee*," he giggled, his nose stinging gently. He twisted his head to the side, smacking his cheek against the couch. "You're doing something to *mee-hee-ha-ha*!" he complained, breaking into a laughing fit that ended in coughing.

"All you have to do is answer the question," Talia said, her voice laced with sugar.

"I'm...a guh-hirl!" Celsius snapped. Her eyes went wide. She'd slipped and said it but now she realized it was true. As much as she tried to deny it, she was a girl now, in fact if not in spirit. She pouted up at Talia. She wanted to get out of here, away from the crazy magician, and out of the drab straitjacket.

Celsius retraced her thoughts for a moment. She was worried about how the straitjacket reflected on her fashion. This was ridiculous; even if she admitted that she was a girl (and technically, she was), that didn't mean she'd suddenly care about her looks. As soon as she got out of the ugly straitjacket, she was going to give Talia as painful of a thrashing as possible without risking breaking one of her nails.

...hey, wait a minute!

"Cut it *ah-hah-hah-hout*!" Celsius giggled. Her chest convulsed to squeeze the laughter out of her. All the colors around her were growing richer and everything the light touched left glowing trails as it moved. She wrinkled her nose and grit her teeth to hold back a laugh at the sight of Talia's glowing face.

"You're not a cat, are you?" Talia asked. Celsius squinted as hard as she could and bared her fangs and tried not to giggle. She worked her jaw up and down, trying to push the mask off her muzzle.

"You're a bat, ri-iiight?" Talia asked, pressing her. Celsius arched her back and stomped against the couch as hard as she could without threatening to break her heels. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she let out a wild peal of giggles, but she *wasn't* saying she was a bat.

With a tap on each of the cat's ears, they grew taller, more cupped, more narrowed to a point. With a tap on top of the mask, Celsius's jaw fell open, unable to keep shut with the strange, swirling, shifting feeling that shrunk her fangs and narrowed her snout.

"I'm not a *ba-hah-hahaha*!" Celsius howled, thrashing from side to side, pounding her legs against the couch. Her whole body heaved with uncontrollable laughter. She wanted it to stop, but

everything was glowing bright and bleeding color. She felt like she was floating off in a cloud. Every exasperated breath brought more gas right into her mouth.

"It's okay, this is a healing process. You're putting your life back together," Talia said, stroking her hair. Celsius's paws lost their soft pads, fingers more slender, her claws larger in comparison to her hands. The same sort of change was sweeping through her feet, which also gained the ability to grip, in case she ever wanted to hang upside down and get a head rush.

"I don't even *hee-hee-have* wings!" Celsius said sharply, trying to cut through the buzzing haziness that every breath from the mask was filling her with.

"Then what are these?" Talia asked. As she reached under Celsius's shoulders, his body came rising up to meet her hands. Thin bone and flesh unfurled from Celsius's back, stretching from her shoulders into the shape of wings. As her wings grew, they slipped into two pockets on the back of the straitjacket, buckled in to keep Celsius from thrashing around and hurting them.

"Nnnrrgh—I'm a bat!" Celsius said, eyes going wide. She was, and her slight frame meant she had to be a bit more delicate than otherwise, but she was used to it. Just don't put her into a scrap or anything—she was best at looking good. Celsius tried to blink and shake away the new reality settling in around her being a bat, but she couldn't shake off something that she was breathing in with every breath.

"And what's your name?" Talia asked.

Celsius worked her jaw and curled her tongue before saying, "Cels-sss..." before trailing off into a hissing snicker. She tried again: "*Ceh-heh-heh-heh*." She couldn't get it out. Colors were popping in front of her eyes, growing too ripe and then bursting into new shades that grew and grew. Talia's face was half-hidden behind the blur of brightness that Celsius saw everywhere.

"Don't you remember what the doctor told you?" Talia said. She picked up the notebook and gently smacked it against the mask, holding it inches from Celsius's face. "You're batty," she said, then leaned in closer to repeat, "You're Batty." The word hung right in front of her face.

Celsius wriggled her whole body like a fish out of water, thrashing, shaking her head, grunting in the back of her throat, her eyes screwed shut. That didn't even make sense. Why would anyone name a bat Batty? It was so—*heh heh*—stupid. *Ee hee hee*, and kinda silly too. Her grin grew more unhinged. One of her eyes had a fully dilated pupil; the other was like a pinprick. Celsius blinked and giggled and clawed at the inside of her straitjacket, but she couldn't get away. Talia held the word right there, inches from her eyes.

"I'm Batty!" she burst out, followed by roaring laughter. Talia set the notebook down and disappeared into the changing rack while Celsius—now Batty—cackled to herself on the couch. In her cute magician's outfit again, Talia was back, one hand on Batty's shoulder, the other pulling off her mask and loosening the buckles on her straitjacket.

"Oh my god, Batty, you're safe!" Talia gasped. In a few quick motions, she had Batty out of the straitjacket and pulled her into a tight hug.

"Miss Tee!" Batty squeaked, returning the hug tightly. With all the laughing gas still in her system, her brain was filling in the gaps as she went. Why was she in red shoes and a sparkling dress and hugging a stage magician? Because she was her assistant, *obviously*.

"They were trying to fix you! I'm so glad I rescued you," Talia said.

Wow, Batty thought, I just got rescued. Talia must be a really nice person.

"Don't worry, Miss Tee. You can't fix what never worked to start with!" she said. The two of them shared a bout of wild giggles.

In the seats of the ruined Verite Theater, a string of stolen cameras with wires strung between them were pointed at the stage. Backstage, pilfered radio equipment was hijacking every broadcast channel in the city. If you were watching TV, right now, it was tuned into the amazing Talia Tsannarova's magic show.

The hyena girl unfurled the red carpet she'd rolled up. As it unraveled to the very end, with a pop, Batty appeared, as if thrown from the carpet. She landed on the floor, face down and ass up.

"There *shree-hee-hee* is, everyone!" Talia said. In a whirl of brown fur and wings, Batty was back up on her feet, smiling and bowing to the cameras.

"Now that I've shown you all some sleight of hand-and-bat, how would you like to see a bit of hypnosis?" Talia asked, pulling Batty over beside her.

"Sure thing, Miss Tee!" Batty said, smiling brightly for the camera.

If Talia's guesses were correct, at least one in five people in the Empire City metro area would be watching. Maybe more, if the channel hijack was generating buzz and people were turning in to see what was up. Twenty percent was more than enough.

"I want you looking right into my eyes," she said, reaching out and holding Batty's cheeks. Instead of looking at her assistant, though, she was looking right into Camera 3. A tap of the foot pedals switched the broadcast angle over to Camera 3.

"I want you to think about who you'd want to be if you could be anything. Go beyond the boring realistic stuff, I'm talking your deep-down fantasies. Maybe you wanna be a knight, or a monster, or you've always wanted to be a bikini model, or you wish you were a guy instead of a girl. Whatever it is, think about it as hard as you can," Talia said.

All over the city, she was staring out of TV screens. She lifted her wand and pointed it right at the camera. A thunderclap rung out as magic jumped from wand to camera, from camera to antenna, then coursed through the air. Magic burst out through every television tuned into her show, full of transformative energy.

All across the city, everyone who'd been watching was taking on new forms. Forms that they weren't necessarily prepared for, forms which they hadn't necessarily thought through entirely.

From behind the curtain, smoke drifted out, coming from the shorted-out broadcast equipment. Their show wasn't over, though--the broadcast was just the first act. The real show started now.

"Good job," Talia told Batty, giving her a warm hug around the shoulder, "Really broke a leg."

"Come on, I wanna see what's going on!" Batty said, giving Talia a push toward the door. One thing was sure: The city was going to be a lot more interesting after their broadcast.