

For a moment nobody in the claustrophobic airless small cabin moved or made a sound.

The next instant chaos ruled. Nearly everyone sprang from their seats and rushed to be the first to the exit.

As tense as he was Victor stayed in his seat, barely. There were plenty of factors involved in his unexpected inaction. He was sitting at the window, and the large male seated between him and the aisle could easily be described as a bit more than overweight.

He had risen to his feet in that first second of chaotic madness, and to Victor it was as if the sun had been eclipsed. Despite the raised voices and obvious sounds of scuffles Victor sensed nothing to justify the overreaction. Besides, there were only eleven passengers in the small twelve seater. Realistically an aircraft this small could only be called a commuter plane on its best days. Still ready for flight Victor gripped the edge of the armrests and looked out the window.

As the pilot had only hinted at in his pre-landing announcement there was not the usual asphalt runway. He couldn't see any of the normal infrastructure one would associate with an airport. In fact, he couldn't see any discernible infrastructure at all. Judging by the lack of resources to get the plane back in the air Victor guessed it had taken its last flight. Looking around inside the fuselage he relaxed back into his seat a little.

There was no smoke filling the air. The lights were still on. The only danger present were the fellow passengers. They were all but climbing over each other to get to the exits. He guessed they were just moments away from the claws and fangs coming out. He'd wait, there actually appeared to be no need to hurry. The one flight attendant was doing her best to calm the passengers, but at that moment it would take someone more formidable than the short female was proving to be.

With the door finally open and the rapid exodus complete Victor stood and casually made his way to the door. Except for the pilot, Victor was the last to step out of the plane. He paused with the other male at his back and watched the strange reactions of his fellow passengers.

The fat leopard that had been sitting next to Victor had made a show of getting down on all fours and kissed the ground. He had lifted his head up from the display and stopped. He was now staring at the ground with an intense look of confusion on his face. Victor felt the pilot put a paw on his shoulder and give a gentle nudge as a reminder.

Victor took the last few steps to the ground and to the side letting the pilot do the same. That male stood next to him and observed the passengers as well. The flight attendant was standing with her arms crossed seemingly watching too. Victor noticed however that she was copying advice given from an old action movie. She was standing and gouging out small bits of the ground with her toes. What attracted Victor's attention was the barely noticeable clouds of dust rising from around her feet. The sight seemed odd, strange in a way that didn't square with his own experience.

He could feel the ground under his own pads. It felt wet and soft to him making him wonder at the dust rising from the feet of the ocelot. Looking down he saw that while not grass and weeds it was almost a moss like growth and just as soft to the touch. It grew low and felt spongy when stepped on but unlike moss it failed to bounce back after he took his weight from it. His paw print was clearly outlined in the earth, and just as strangely rather deep leaving Victor puzzled at the quality of the soil.

Looking to the pilot still next to him Victor asked "So, how soon until the rescue crews show up?"

The cougar was staring at something to their right and in the sky. "I don't think we can expect a rescue." His voice managed to sound awestruck and confused while still maintaining a tone of authority at the same time.

Following his gaze Victor joined the pilot in staring. He lifted an arm and blocked out the light of one of the suns. Shifting his arm slightly the light meeting his eyes went from a dazzling blueish white to dusky yellow-orange. He suddenly felt as though the world they stood on was slowly beginning to spin.

The size of the two suns were just as different as their light. The large too orange sun was easily five times the width of the much brighter blueish white. Neither were the right size for the sun from home. Dropping his arm and looking at the landscape Victor saw that the colors were just a bit off from what he'd been used to. Strange as it was, at first glance it could almost pass for home. Trouble was the more Victor looked at their landing site the more he realized things were not quite normal.

The feeling of the world around Victor spinning out from under slowly subsided. He still felt somewhat lightheaded and took a couple deep breaths in a conscious effort to get more oxygen to his brain. He told himself he needed to think and stay calm. He scanned the area checking on the other passengers.

The fat leopard was still on all fours and staring intently at the ground directly under him. Dismissing the leopard he saw that most of the others were staring around as though expecting the rescue that would likely would never come. Each of them seemed to be free of any obvious signs of distress.

Victor looked behind the aircraft to trace the path in the ground it had left. The tires had gouged deep furrows in the soil from the landing. He knew enough about the requirements of air travel to realize just how lucky they all were. The tires had dug deeply into the ground from the moment they'd touched down. He could see they had even sprayed much of the landscape around with chunks and bits of dirt thrown out from under the wheels as they had lost momentum. It was a miracle that the pilot had managed to keep it from rolling end over end.

Looking to the cougar to congratulate and thank him for the amazing landing Victor stopped and stared. Captain Crain was looking at his own uplifted paws. There was a sense of the air around them seeming to shimmer, almost as though the light from beyond him were passing through heated air.

Still breathing heavy, almost panting from his effort to drag in more oxygen Victor began to wonder at the planet they were on. They were able to breathe the air but there just might be environmental factors that were going to do them harm.

Victor looked around at the fellow passengers again. They were still fine, although a few were acting in odd ways. The fat leopard was still on all fours and had dipped his head to the ground again and looked as though he were licking the mossy covered ground. Turning his attention away from the male's strange actions Victor looked back to the captain.

The cougar was looking back at him. Victor noticed that the cat's hat had a small area where the material had disappeared. With his attention drawn to the hole he watched as more of the cap's material seemed to erode away. Looking elsewhere on the cougar Victor could see other areas where his clothes were succumbing to the apparently corrosive environment of the planet. Looking to himself he saw his own clothes were seemingly dissolved away. He also noticed the same shimmering effect around the captain was also in evidence around himself.

Still feeling lightheaded but otherwise fine Victor looked away. He'd rather not watch if the effects started doing the same to their bodies. He instead focused on the strange planet they were trapped on. It looked as though they'd touched down on an endless low plane with gently rolling hills. Another feature of the land registered on Victor's mind. He didn't see any mountains or anything higher than his own

height for as far as the eye could see. Starting down at his feet the ground displayed a patchwork of slightly different shades of color.

"Oh, gods."

Feeling the fur on the back of his neck lift he had to admit he recognized the patterns for what they were. Stretching away in all directions was a patchwork of pastures fields and crops. He could also distinguish thin threads of roads and clusters of small cities. His view was much like he'd seen from altitudes that planes flew. The truth of his situation slammed into him with an almost physical force that took his breath away.

With that realization came a flood of information. They were there for a reason. They had been pulled, all of them, ripped away from their previous lives to here. Nature abhors a vacuum, so Victor had heard. That refrain matched their predicament. They had literally been sucked to this planet to fulfill a much desired role. A power vacuum had existed here. They were to fill it. They had filled a need. They were filling it he corrected himself. He understood also that the processes that had brought them here was just beginning.

Victor looked at the plane with a new expectation. The shape the structure was exhibiting it should have collapsed from its own weight minutes ago. It was eroding faster than anything. Looking back at himself a moment and then the cougar at his side he confirmed his new knowledge. Soon they'd all be standing with nothing but their fur. Nothing but their flesh was going to withstand the process. In exchange they were to be, changed.

Victor looked to the leopard that was still on all four paws. Given his new knowledge the fat leopard was changing in ways that Victor intuitively understood. His fur was darkening, the yellows and tans slowly blending in with the spots of his rosettes. His ears and tail were also lengthening. Victor could even detect the beginnings of a pair of horns sprouting from the top of his head. He also understood why.

"Son of a bitch." Stepping to the leopard Victor reached down and pulled him up. "Stop that."

"What?" the leopard asked looking at Victor in surprise.

To Victor's dismay he actually licked his chops. The leopard's tongue had changed as well, now a long thin appendage. It was forked enough that Victor thought it something more likely to have been seen flickering from the snout of a snake.

Almost hissing in answer Victor said "You're eating them, hundreds of them."

A moment after speaking Victor felt something subtle focus on him. He understood the moment, the manifestation of his *raison d'être* would be expressed. Whatever he did next would define the rest of his experience in way he had no ability to predict. Stepping back from the dark leopard Victor gave voice to his feelings of the moment. "I'm not going to stand by and let you harm anyone."

Even as he spoke he felt something within him shift. His head cleared with a snap of confidence he'd never felt in his life.

The dark leopard smirked. "So tell me oh pure one, just how many have you killed by stepping on them just in walking over to me?"

Victor knew the point he was making. He turned to look at the tracks he would have left. There were none. He'd left no footprints. His power was acting on the land already. Even before he looked back at the dark leopard the cougar was stepping over to stand with him. The male had grown several inches

taller and noticeably thicker with muscle. The graceful feline indeed looked like a god. He too left no marks in the land.

The Captain stopped next to Victor. "Neither of us are going to let any of you harm the inhabitants here without a fight."

Victor spared a glance to the cougar. His fur was still the same color but now there was a glow around the male. Victor wondered if he exhibited the same effect. He turned back to the dark leopard.

The leopard had his head lowered and was looking between Victor and the Captain. A second later he backed away from them. Victor saw he was leaving deep prints in the land.

Pointing at the leopard's feet the cougar accused "You're doing that on purpose, aren't you?"

"And if I am? How are you going to stop me?" He replied smirking his minor triumph.

As sorely tempted Victor was to act he was almost mesmerized at the continuing changes of the leopard. The male's new horns reached back almost to the tips of his equally overlong ears. His fur had darkened to nearly full black. Above him was a shimmer of something over his head. To Victor it was almost as though it was an afterimage in his sight of looking at something bright for too long. The shape looked suspiciously like a crown.

"You know, or you should." The cougar said.

The expression on the dark leopard's face told the story. "It's too soon to get into petty squabbles."

Victor looked around at the rest of their group. "You all have to make a choice."

"Yes." The cougar at his side agreed.

In glancing at the male Victor had seen the changes the cougar had undergone. Where the dark leopard had trended to darken the cougar's fur had stayed the same. It was the environment around the cougar that had changed. He now had a visible aura, clear and bright yellowish orange. It was lighter but matched the tint of his fur in ways that pleased the eye. The still growing cougar looked back down at Victor and after looking him over from top to bottom smiled and nodded. He guessed at the nod that he had much the same aura effect around himself.

Victor looked at his fellow gods. No, too late for them, not true gods now, demigods perhaps. He noticed they were dwindling. His eyes couldn't see the change, yet, but his new senses could detect the drop in their potential. He also understood that as they hesitated more power was accruing to him and the other gods. He could feel the proliferation of his abilities. He took a moment to satisfy his curiosity.

Lifting a paw up he saw his aura was a bluish with. He recognized the importance of the color instantly. It matched the color of the smaller more powerful sun in the sky. It matched his snow white fur even better than the cougar's aura. The arctic fox smiled at the irony. He and the cougar were to be the primary gods of light of their new home.

In looking at them the leopard too understood the balance of power was shifting in the other's favor. He turned at those watching. "Don't let these two intimidate you into a mistake. Join me, and we can rule this world as the gods were are."

Most continued to hesitate. A fox stepped stepped to the dark leopard first. She was followed by a rabbit and kangaroo. Together they all began darkening.

Two stepped to Victor and the now huge cougar. The ocelot flight attendant and a wolf. Even as they chose their auras became apparent. The wolf bore a dusky red glow that gave his deep brown pelt the look of polished bronze and an air of barely restrained power. Victor's first thought was he'd become the god of war. His new understanding corrected that. He was the god of justice, to be the strong and powerful force of righteousness on this world.

The ocelot's aura became a vibrant green. Victor smiled in understanding. That moment of her digging her toes in the ground had marked her in the eyes of the inhabitants. She was to be the nature god of the land. The ocelot was the embodiment of growth fertility and life of the land. She too grinned her understanding as her fellow gods stared and appreciated her body. From her and the other females would spring a pantheon of even more gods.

The four that remained stood looking undecided from one group to the other. Victor could see they were now visibly shrinking, the outward sign of their rapidly dwindling potential.

The dark leopard sneered at the four remaining. "Fuck you, then." The dark umbra above his head chose that moment to burst into smoldering smokey tendrils. They couldn't truly be considered flames as they bore no light. His eyes scanned the undecided. "Now that you've shown what a indecisive waste you are I'd want nothing to do with you."

As shocked was Victor felt at the accusation the four cringed in terror. Their stature diminished even faster. In seconds they were only waist high to Victor and his fellow gods.

"That was unfair." Victor said. He was still grappling with his role. He understood the cougar was the god of might, huge and strong, just as the sun that shared his aura's color. Most would look to him for strength and power. Victor knew the cougar's mind now as much as that male would also know his. They had become much like twins in godhood. He was pleased to have an ally of the cougar's character.

Victor's role however was more subtle and in many ways much more potent. The inhabitants knew from observation the large orange yellow sun circled the smaller blue. That sun was deemed to be the stronger of the two despite its smaller stature. He was to now be the god of intelligence and wisdom, thought to be the true power and force in the land. Following an insight he was still a little uncertain of he continued "We accept you. Help us protect and look over this world with us."

An instant later each of the four exhibited a glowing aura. Almost as one they joined Victor's group. The dark leopard laughed as they stepped behind the taller gods.

"Yes, let them burden you for protection." The sooty feline mocked. "Well, time for me to go. Besides, you have me outnumbered, for now." An instant later he disappeared. The rest of his cadre disappeared an instant later.

Victor understood as much as the others. He'd taken his place, the place the collective desires and prayers of the inhabitants had ordained for one the likes of which he had become.

It was also time they take their places. Victor looked at his fellow gods of light with a smile. They blinked out of the inhabitant's sight an instant later.

Only the twin straight valleys created by their arrival remained, and even that was healed and covered with fresh vegetation by the sunsets.