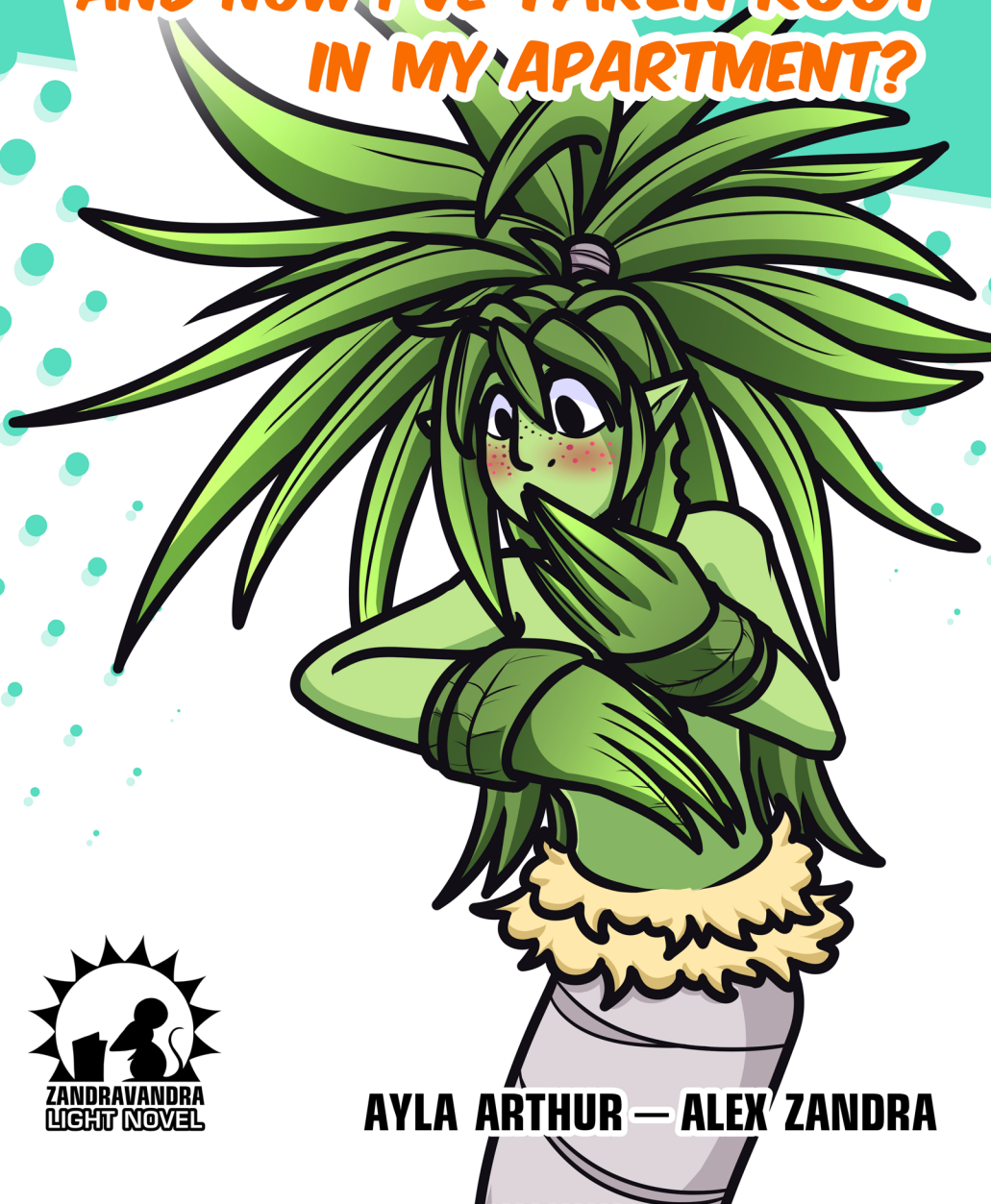


**I ACCIDENTALLY BOUGHT A  
PLANT LAMP TO TREAT MY  
WINTER DEPRESSION  
AND NOW I'VE TAKEN ROOT  
IN MY APARTMENT?**



**AYLA ARTHUR — ALEX ZANDRA**

## Personal growth is hard. Sometimes we need a little help.

It's hard to be productive when we're depressed, doubly so when it feels like the very seasons are against us. And sometimes, once we start digging, we find that the roots of our discomfort run surprisingly deep.

Professional artist Cano knows this all too well, falling prey to winter doldrums year after year; it's become practically routine at this point. When the weather turns cold, they shut themselves in and ride out the sadder months of the year. But what if they didn't have to accept this? What if they stood up for themselves and took action?

What if, in a fit of self-actualization, they made an impulsive online purchase and got more than they bargained for?

More than a year in the making, *Plant Lamp* is an illustrated light novel about surviving, thriving, and the messy path in between. I hope you like it! Let's keep making wonderful things together. ♥

—Alex Zandra

@fourarmsdemon  
fourarmsdemon.com

@zandravandra  
patreon.zandravandra.com  
zandravandra.com

# I Accidentally Bought A Plant Lamp To Treat My Winter Depression And Now I've Taken Root In My Apartment?

Written by **Alex Zandra Van Chestein**

Illustrated by **Ayla Arthur**

Edited by **Laura Ronemus**

Diversity consulting & dialogue help by **Kortney Terry**

Disability sensitivity reading by **Cassandra Sparks**

Plant girl sensitivity reading by **Andi McClure**

Additional consulting by **Rachel J. Stevens,**

**Cassandra Sparks** and **Andi McClure**

Additional story help by Aura Triolo & Amber Wolfer

Copyright © 2020 Alex Zandra Van Chestein

All rights reserved. Please don't copy or distribute this book.

ISBN (digital) 978-1-990400-00-1

ISBN (print) 978-1-990400-01-8

*to those who met the mess I was,  
and helped me grow regardless*



# Contents

Rare Loot	7
Cold Comfort Food	9
Special Delivery	15
Unpacking	20
Stream of Consciousness	23
Artistic Growth	28
Shifting Awake	30
Creation Workshop	32
Breaking Ground	34
Branching Paths	36
Root Awakening	40
Lobby Drop-Off	44
Limbering Up	46
Opening the Door	51
Brief Connection	55
Nightmare Difficulty	59
A Thorny Problem	61
Lights Out	64
Harmony	69
A Crack in the Curtains	72
Like a Drum	80
Barking Up the Wrong Me	85
In Knots	91
Growing Closer	94
Housekeeping	95
Burgeoning Anticipation	105
Ability Tree	110
Intertwined	117
Uprooted	125
Brace Yourself	130
Transplant Shock	136
Make Like a Tree	144
Next Year	149



Crystal Guardian

Lvl. 88

Double

NelDotWham

Cano\_Pics

Strawberryjan

vern\_notice

# Rare Loot

Time seemed to stand still as the gargantuan guardian hung in the air, its multifaceted crystal blade still on a downward trajectory over the entire party. Though a thousand glowing hands pulled it back as it cut toward its target, not even Double's forbidden arachnomancy could stop the most powerful attack in *Other world Online*.

But they didn't need to stop it, they just needed to slow it down enough for Nell to take aim. She brought down her golden hound hammer on the cannon of light she'd conjured, sending a deafening blast of concentrated energy directly at the colossal sword's shatterpoint.

In an instant the room was filled with flying debris as the guardian's weapon exploded into shards, shredding the very ground the heroes were standing on—save for the precariously small circle where the team stood. Cano's shield mountain kept them safe, every scratch upon its surface immediately repaired by Janice's living workshop.

The guardian, its weapon destroyed and its protection gone, took one stumbling step forward.

Then it was all over.

In a crimson blur, a lupine whirlwind tore into the behemoth's flank, breaking the lock on its final health bar and bringing it down to zero in a single string of perfectly-sequenced attacks.

The guardian fell to the ground, exploding in a shower of treasure.

"That's what you get," Vernon said as he ran his claws along the edge of his blade, "when you mess with the Ourobros, you mess with—"

"YEA AAAH!" Cano yelled out suddenly, prompting a stunned silence from their teammates.

"Dude!" Vernon pre-emptively reached over to his stream deck, finger hovering over the *LOOT FX* key. "Did you get the rare drop?!"

"THE HELL COMMISSION PAYMENT CAME THROUGH!" Cano shouted with uncharacteristic glee, straining their voice modulation software in the process and giving their usual cartoon voice some peaks of static.

Vernon deadpanned at the camera.

"WOO!" everyone else shouted in unison, cheers erupting in the voice chat.

"Oh my gosh, you did it! You got paid!" one party member shouted.

"You're FREE!" another yelled out.

Vernon rolled his eyes and shifted his hand down one row, tapping the *Artists!! (shrug)* key. He gave a mischievous grin to his audience and rolled his eyes as the stream—and soon after, the chat—momentarily filled with falling shrug emojis.

"Alright, well let's see what we got in the final treasure chest then!" Vernon said, starting up a quick insta-poll. "Well, 'final' until they release some new content. Chat, get your guesses in!"

Back on-screen, Vernon's avatar danced in place as the rest of the team jumped victoriously around Cano's character, the sound of the game's single-use party poppers filling the air.

# Cold Comfort Food

"See you soon!" the waiter said without looking as he busily cleared a table in his section.

Cano waved goodbye, then stepped outside. The staff remembered them well, despite the many months since their last brunch. It felt weird to eat there alone, albeit not as weird as it would've been to suddenly get the gang back together for a surprise meal. They briefly wondered what everyone else had been up to all this time... Ah well. They could know the answer easily enough, but that would require reinstalling a certain social network app, one they were only too glad to have left in the first place. Much better to stick to places where your account didn't have to reflect reality so closely.

Cano reached back and pulled their hood up over their tuque. The air had gotten so cold so fast. At least all that food and coffee would keep them warm for a bit—though they could already feel familiar aches and pains settling in, made worse by the chill in the air. They decided not to press their luck and started heading home.

The return trip had become second nature by now, a series of furtive glances up from their phone whenever an intersection popped up. The neighborhood was picturesque, yes, but it was also quiet and even and measured, and those were traits Cano had come to treasure. Less risk of tripping on something, or stumbling over an uneven step, and paying for it tenfold.

A block, and then one more, and then another, all committed to memory: the same stores they never checked out, the same intimidating alleys they never dared to venture into, the same parks they never visited. It was all a colorful interlude between where they were and where they were going.

A key, a lock, a flight of stairs; a keypad code and a warm, warm home.

On most days, that was all that mattered.

Cano hung up their coat, kicked off their shoes, and walked over to the kitchen sink to wash up. They winced as they carefully blotted their hands with a towel; the air was already too dry. Cano made a mental note to get more hand lotion as they flopped onto their couch with a heavy sigh.

They hated this time of year.

Decent days were few and far between, and only lasted a precious few hours before everything got dark. Granted, they rarely saw the good days during the warm and sunny half of the year either, but the sunlight

always managed to peek through the gaps in the blackout curtains. Somehow, knowing that there was a beautiful day somewhere out there was enough.

No sense in dwelling on it now, though, Cano reasoned. The dark days had begun and it was time to wrap themselves up in blankets, hibernate through the dreary months, and suffer through their least productive time of the year. Good thing that nightmare commission was over with! Now they could look forward to projects where each update *wasn't* met with a thousand and one edit requests.

They sighed again.

"Winter's going to suck," Cano said to no one in particular. They pulled off their tuque as their body slowly acclimated to the downright tropical temperature they liked to set the thermostat to. They dared to peek inside the wool cap, but quickly looked away and rolled it up into a ball before throwing it onto the kitchen table. They briefly considered getting a trimmer again. Maybe that would be for the best. Eventually, there'd be more hair left inside the hat than on their head. Why fight it? What was the use?

They dug out their phone and got some music playing. Gosh, it was starting already, wasn't it? The sun went away and their mood went with it. Molehills became mountains. No wonder no one wanted to hang out with them anymore. Well, not exactly; the *Other world Online* group was always there. But then, their online friends didn't have to contend with them in person, did they? It was easy to only let the best parts shine through.

No one could stomach all of Cano for long, they reasoned. Not up close. Thank goodness for long-distance friendships.

**Strawberryjan:** I'm going to rip my hair out.

They stared at the notification on their phone for what seemed like a full minute. Did... was Janice listening in on them? No, they hadn't actually said anything out loud. And besides, that was a bit of a stretch, even for Cano's well-practiced hypervigilance. Still, how on earth did—

**Strawberryjan:** WHERE ARE MY SHORTCUTS??

"Ohh," Cano said with a sigh of relief. It all made sense now. Cobblestone had pushed out new versions of their software suite last month in an attempt to unify their interface, to many people's chagrin. Janice was one of the best artists Cano knew—they'd been reading her comics since they were a little kid—but one thing she wasn't was an early adopter. They unlocked their phone and tapped over to their group chat to say hi.

**Cano\_Pics:** did the update get you

**Strawberryjan:** I was sure I turned those off!! Now everything is dark grey and doesn't work!!!

This should be an easy enough problem to fix, Cano thought. They would just need to guide Janice through setting up a profile—at long last—and customizing her shortcuts back to the way she liked them. Simple!

Cano couldn't help but marvel at how matter-of-factly they were going about this. Before, they'd have been falling over themselves to help their childhood role model, but now... After enough years of hanging out with and learning from the master, they'd grown accustomed to it. There wasn't a giant gap between the two anymore; this was about helping out a friend. A friend who stubbornly stuck to technological preferences acquired decades before, granted, but a friend nonetheless.

Pedestals were surprisingly resilient, they mused. Always took a long time to bring them down.

The sun was long gone by the time Janice's copy of Cobblestone Paint had been brought to heel, much to both of their relief. *Life in Furgatory's* next comic strip would go up as planned.

**Strawberryjan:** Thanks kiddo. Sorry for making you do my tech support! A few more years and my kids will be able to handle that!

Cano smiled and sank down into their couch, looking up at the ceiling. The darkness outside really didn't do the top half of their living room any favors. Nothing but blank stucco surrounded by walls that had been promised art prints. Prints that themselves were waiting, rolled-up in cardboard tubes, begging to be free. They had been begging for years.

**Cano\_Pics:** don't mention it, happy to help

Not like I have much else to do, they thought, hesitating to say that out loud. Or online, for that matter. They knew they couldn't just type in something like that and move on; Janice would want to know more. She was a problem solver, and Cano didn't like the uncomfortable social contact that came with being solved.

**Strawberryjan:** How are you holding up? Isn't it getting close to sad season again up there?

Cano sighed. Fair enough. They *also* didn't like the uncomfortable social contact that inevitably followed being cagey when someone checked in on them.

**Cano\_Pics:** yeah

**Cano\_Pics:** it sucks

They took a deep breath, then sighed again. They knew what Janice was going to say next. Hydrate, remember to hydrate! Cano got up and made their way to the kitchen. They really should've gotten some drinks while they were out; now it was dark, and they'd already taken off all their cold-weather layers. They weren't going back outside again.

They poured themselves a glass of water from the tap. At least the city's water wasn't bad. It wasn't good either, they reckoned; it was always a chore to get any of it in their system. But, well, gotta hydrate. They looked over at their phone as the notification pinged. There it was. This time they'd been one step ahead.

**Strawberryjan:** Have you thought about getting one of those lamps?

Cano stared at the message as they returned to the couch and picked their phone back up. Huh, they'd guessed wrong this time.

**Cano\_Pics:** a what

**Strawberryjan:** They make therapy lamps for seasonal depression now. It's supposed to be as bright as the sun. It could help with those doldrums!

**Cano\_Pics:** I never thought about that

They paced between the living room and the kitchen along a practiced path, another circuit they'd grown intimately familiar with over the years. It wasn't a bad idea; they always dreaded the oncoming depression but had long since given up on finding new ways to cope.

**Cano\_Pics:** maybe

**Cano\_Pics:** don't these things cost a lot though

They shook their head. Right, it was starting to come back now. Those things weren't cheap. And once you got one thing, they had you! Then it was all about upselling you to the humidifier, and the natural oils, and the—

**Strawberryjan:** Not necessarily! There's plenty of affordable ones.

**Strawberryjan:** You finally got paid for that last commission, why not treat yourself a little? You deserve it!

Cano blinked at that. Hm.

**Cano\_Pics:** yeah

**Cano\_Pics:** maybe

**Cano\_Pics:** thanks

They turned to their computer, staring at the massive husk of a



wooden desk inherited from the previous tenant, the swivel chair they'd had since their first apartment, the clumsy arrangement of lamps, the old TV tray holding up their tablet...

**Cano\_Pics:** maybe it's time for a change

**Strawberryjan:** That's the spirit! Kick that sadness  
in the shins!

**Cano\_Pics:** haha

Cano smirked at the mental image. They'd never really considered their sadness to be a person, much less anything beyond an abstract concept, but the idea of getting back at it lit a small fire somewhere deep inside. They were tired, so tired, of letting this yearly sadness put them through the wringer.

They sat down at the desk and pulled their keyboard closer. Took another sip of water. Maybe it was time to show their seasonal depression who was holding the pen. Cano opened up Lighthouse, which had become their go-to solution for conscientious shopping. An app that let them shop at neighborhood stores without having to leave the house? A match made in heaven.

They weren't in a hurry and they wanted the maximum reach possible, so they broadened the search to other communities. Sorted by ratings, so they'd see the things other users had positive experiences with. No restriction on delivery, either; they'd trust the postal service to put it all together when it was convenient. Alright! Cano had stated their needs. Lighthouse would do the rest.

They knew themselves well: if they even so much as looked at reviews, they'd be there all night. No, not today. No chance. Whether it was from the sudden burst of encouragement from their longtime mentor or being unusually adequately hydrated, they had a moment of clarity and they weren't about to waste it. No getting bogged down in infinite browser tabs, no weighing the pros and cons; they'd just gotten a payday and they were going to treat themselves.

Sun lamp? Best reviews? Sold!

Most people also bought a humidifier? Hm.

They glanced back at the kitchen sink. Why smear their tablet with hand lotion when they could just avoid having dry, cracking skin to begin with? Sold!

Speaking of hands, was there anything to give their arms some support? The new tablet always felt heavy after a few hours. Oh! "There we go," they mumbled as they found a section for ergonomic adjustable arm mount things. Find something compatible, and... sold!

Anything else? Hmm, what about a new chair?

Oh goodness, there were a lot of different chairs. Considering this was where Cano would be sitting for most of the day, it was considerably

harder to make a snap judgement. There were so many options! It didn't help that there were so many sub-categories, either. Was comfort the best choice? Should versatility matter? What about posture? Some models now made sure to discourage slouching, but that might mean re-learning how to get into the zone while drawing...

**Strawberryjan:** Works like a charm! Thanks again!

Cano jolted upright at the notification. Oh no. They'd gotten lost in the reviews again! No chair was perfect. And most of them came with armrests, which weren't ideal with the tablet mount they were getting, so they were reconsidering *that* purchase, and—

**Strawberryjan:** How are things on your end?

No! They didn't want to tell Janice that they were still working on this. Not this time! Cano wanted to give positive, decisive news. New search! Ergonomic chair, highest rated!

*Click!*

Cano didn't even let the pictures load. They added the first item on the list to their cart, checked out, and BAM! Done!

**Cano\_Pics:** all good

They leaned back in their chair with a heavy, relieved sigh, and glanced at the email receipt. What a price tag. Then again, they'd never had so much money in their bank account at once. If not now, when? They wanted to invest in a better tomorrow, not hoard the shadow of today.

They looked at the delivery estimate before archiving the email. Monday. Alright then; it was a date.

**Cano\_Pics:** gonna kick that sadness in the shins

# Special Delivery

"Dude, just go outside!" Vernon said over the whirring sound of rapidly unspooling fabric as he set up his green screen. "Rip it off like a band-aid!"

Cano sighed, trying very hard to contain their irritation. "It's... it's not that easy; you have to un—"

"Hold on," Vernon interrupted, "I gotta grab some food and get set up. BRB."

Cano rubbed their eyes. It was hard enough to put things into words when someone was actively trying to understand them.

"Don't you mind him, kiddo," Janice said. "I get what you mean. Focus on better things! Today's the big day, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Cano replied as they refreshed the tracking page. "Should be today. I mean, it's an estimate, but they're usually accurate when it comes to this stuff."

"Is your lady friend bringing your new things over?"

"Wh... no!" Cano protested, standing up. "She's... she's not my lady friend. She's just, you know, we just know each other by now. She's nice enough to leave things inside the door so—"

"I mean," Janice said pensively, "if you gave her a key, that sounds pretty serious to me."

"She doesn't have a key!" Cano said, pacing to the bedroom and back as they adjusted their headset. "She just has the code to the door. I put it in the delivery notes usually. If packages get left inside, they don't get stolen."

"I'm still winning this argument, kiddo," Janice chided. "Code or key, you're letting her inside your home."

"Just in my place's lobby!" Cano specified. "It's tiny, and there's nothing in it. It's just for coats and deliveries. There's an *inside* inside door, and *that* one has a key. I don't give that one out. I'm safe."

Janice chuckled. "Whatever you say."

"What are we saying?" Nell asked, popping into the voice chat.

"Cano's just telling us about their girlfriend."

"She's—she's not my girlfriend. She's not even my friend. I think. We're just... friendly. You know?"

Nell chuckled. "I know. Hi, you three."

"Two. Vern's AFK," Cano said, sitting back down. "He might come back; he might not. You know how it is."

*Bee-bloop.* The tell-tale sound accompanied vern\_notice's disconnection from the chat.

Cano felt a shiver down their spine. Oh no. Had Vernon heard them? Was he mad at them? They hadn't meant to be rude; they were just... a bit frustrated with his insensitivity. That didn't make them a bad person, did it?

"Speak of the devil," Nell said. "Got booted for inactivity again." Her fingers danced across her mechanical keyboard. "Yup, he's been streaming for, like, five minutes. Prolly just muted this call and forgot about it again."

Cano exhaled with relief.

"So how are things with the not-girlfriend friendly-friend?" Nell asked.

That managed to make Cano chuckle. "I'm just getting a delivery today."

"Oh. Ohhh! The big one! Your seasonal affective disorder care package!"

"Yeah!" Cano said, refreshing the tracking page again. "Should be. I'm kind of excited about it. Should be any minute n—"

*BZZZZZZT!*

"It's here!" Cano yelled as they hopped to their feet and stepped over to the intercom. "Yes! ...Yes, I'll come help!" They typed a quick 'brb' in the group chat and turned their mic off.

Renée was already setting the first box inside the apartment's private lobby by the time Cano had thrown a bathrobe on and opened the door to the living room. "Good morning!" she playfully called out once she made eye contact. "Big order today!"

Cano crossed their arms and gave an awkward chuckle. "Heh, yeah, it's uh..." they started to reply as the postal worker headed back down the stairs. "It's uh... I figured I'd make a change, you know?"

The second box was a little bigger and, from the looks of it, a lot heavier. It wasn't like Renée to break a sweat, and even she was taking her time bringing it upstairs and setting it down. "You started sculpting marble or something?" she said before returning to her truck for the rest.

"Hah! Uh, no, not really!" Cano half-yelled as they tried, failed, and then tried again to move the boxes further in to free up some more room. Were they all this heavy? There was no way they'd be able to get even one of these up the stairs without dearly paying for it the next day. They sighed, hoping Renée wouldn't hold it against them if they sat this one out. Cano took a closer look at the boxes themselves to pass the time. Was this one the chair? No, too small for that. Then what? The mounting arm, maybe?

They peeked down the stairs. A large box was coming up toward them, seemingly of its own accord. Presumably, somewhere under it was the delivery woman's shoulder holding it up as she climbed.



Renée maneuvered the large cube of cardboard up past the bend and into the lobby with one arm in a way that made Cano question how their eyes perceived physical reality.

"How'd you do that?" they asked as the postal worker set the third box down and handed them a fourth, smaller one that she'd somehow tucked under her other arm.

Renée grinned. "Muscle and practice! You get used to it." She reached for the small electronic pad at her belt and held it out.

Cano just stared at it, or rather at the well-toned arm holding it, for a long moment. Despite the many times the two of them had interacted like this, the artist had never quite gotten over just how *effortless* Renée made everything look. She moved with the ease and confidence of someone comfortable with their body in a way that made something inside of Cano's chest tighten.

"Sign here, please."

Cano blinked. "Oh! Right, sorry," they said as they gently took the stylus from the electronic device and scribbled on the screen obligingly. "Thank you so much. I know it's a lot, I... I don't usually get this much. It's a, uh, special occasion."

"I getcha," Renée said as she took the pad back. She took off her cap to fan herself with it for a moment and glanced at the screen. "You know I've been meaning to ask, is that a drawing?"

Cano blinked. "Oh!" they said as realization dawned, then pointed to their signature. "Yeah, uh, sorry, artist's habit, I guess? It's like, supposed to be a boat, and the shape here is the person standing on it, like—"

"Ohh, it's a canoe! I get it. Cano, canoe." Renée said with a grin as she fitted her cap back over her thick hair bun. "Clever."

Cano smiled sheepishly. "Heh, uh, yeah, maybe. Thank you."

"You have a good day now!" Renée said as she walked back down the stairs. "Good luck with all that unpacking!"

"Uh! Yeah!" Cano yelled back before the front door closed behind the postal worker. They leaned back against the wall, taking a deep breath. "Thanks," they added, to no one in particular.

**Cano\_Pics:** this is so many boxes  
**Strawberryjan:** Are you going to do an unboxing? :)  
**vern\_notice:** yeah those rule! they get killer numbers  
**Cano\_Pics:** haha nah  
**Cano\_Pics:** my place is a mess  
**Strawberryjan:** I'd offer to call and keep you company  
but I gotta go pick up the kids.  
**Cano\_Pics:** it's okay, next time maybe  
**Strawberryjan:** Sorry kiddo!  
**Cano\_Pics:** no worries  
**Cano\_Pics:** I can just put on a stream or something  
**NellDotWham:** I can call!  
**NellDotWham:** I've got some free time before they need  
me at work  
**Cano\_Pics:** you sure?  
**NellDotWham:** yeah!!  
**Cano\_Pics:** yeah okay  
**Cano\_Pics:** let's do that  
**Cano\_Pics:** thanks!

# Unpacking

"So, how's it feel?" Nell asked over the constant rhythmic sound of her typing, filling Cano's living room-slash-office-slash-studio with the pleasant auditory equivalent of a downpour across a tin roof.

The artist let out a groan in response as they dragged themselves from under their desk, by far one of their least favorite activities. "It's not ready yet," they added before falling prey to a fit of coughing. The dust situation had gotten out of control; a few more times crawling under their desk and Cano might even do something about it.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's just..." Cano said, trailing off as they gritted their teeth and pulled themselves to their feet. They stood there for a few moments until the aching settled down, then reached for their glass of water. "It's just a little dusty, is all. I forgot how much of a pain these were to set up." They reached up from their sitting position on the floor and pulled the ergonomic arm up, then out, then down. "Wow, this thing has reach."

"I told you!" Nell said with an audible smile. "Mounted arms really grow on you!"

"Dang," Cano said as they tested the arm's reach. They still needed to attach their drawing tablet to it, but so far the mobile mount felt extremely solid, even far out of its intended position. "This is, like, a game-changer. I could pull the couch up and just draw lying down. This is great!"

Nell laughed. "Sounds like a good way to fall asleep on the job, though."

"Yeah, well, I'm not hearing any downsides."

"Don't go all Rip Van Winkle on us now," Nell said before a distant alarm beeped. "Alright, I gotta get back to it. Good luck with the setup!"

"Thanks," Cano said as they rose to their feet and dusted themselves off. The group chat was quiet once again, but it was just as well; the first box was accounted for, and now it was time for the second.

It turns out there was a reason that one was so heavy: the store had packed the sun lamp and the humidifier together. Cano put the latter aside for now and focused on the *pièce de résistance*: the therapy lamp. Although, the more they looked at the box, the less they understood what exactly they had gotten themselves into. They'd expected some sort of soft new-age packaging, not... industrial utilitarian minimalism stamped on the corner of a bare cardboard slab.

"Huh," they said as they searched for a seam or some tape to cut



through to get inside. After making the rounds twice, Cano just shrugged and started to peel at the flap on one end until it ripped open, revealing the tightly-stacked parts inside.

This was... odd. This was odd, right?

They carefully slid everything out of the box, which was in and of itself an ordeal; whoever had packed this had barely left enough room for the single sheet of paper's worth of instructions. Even that was no help, as Cano couldn't make heads or tails of the endless lines of jargon, colorful graphs, or charts filled top to bottom with numbers. At least one thing stood out: a bolded, underlined note about leaving it off for 8 hours for optimal results.

Did that mean it had to be on for the rest of the time? That seemed like a lot.

Cano reached for their phone and tapped over to the messaging app. Maybe Janice would know, seeing as how she'd recommended the thing. But before they could type anything in, they saw the last thing they'd said.

**Cano\_Pics:** gonna kick that sadness in the shins

Right. If that's what it took to make winter less of a dreadful nightmare, then fine.

"Let there be light," Cano said as they started putting the lamp together. As it took shape, however, they realized that it didn't seem to come with any sort of fixture. Where were they supposed to put it? Were they going to have to hang it? The strange design didn't really lend itself to any... aha!

Cano stood up and cleared some space on top of the shelf next to their desk. There we go. They could just prop it up there for now and figure out something better later. The important thing was to get it working today, and the sooner, the better; it was already getting dark.

Building the lamp was a rather straightforward affair, even with the sparse instructions provided. Still, it looked like a prop from some sort of science fiction show. Once the light apparatus was connected to the power-box-thingamajig, Cano lifted the whole bulky thing up onto the shelf and leaned it against the metal frame. There, that should do it. If the angle wasn't right, they could just adjust it later—provided this wasn't one of those lamps that get blisteringly hot if you leave them on too long. On that note...

Cano rooted around in one the boxes left over from their previous failed attempt at improving their workspace. They dug out a spare wireless plug, then hooked the whole thing up. There! It'd be pretty simple to program the outlet to turn off for eight hours. They'd long since learned to automate anything that their memory could mess up.

Cano finished their glass of water and let out a sigh. The largest

box remained, which meant it was time to find out what chair their past self had ordered. They reached for the box cutter once more and half-smiled. It had been a while since they'd gotten a present, much less a surprise one. Might as well enjoy it.

"Oh right," they said as they saw the smaller box sitting on the table. "The humidifier."

Change of plans, they thought, as they quickly set about to get the humidifier up and running. They wanted to keep the surprise for last. Thankfully this build was much more straightforward: the unit was already pre-assembled, and it had a tube for tapping into the water line under the sink. They put it on the kitchen counter, turned it on—better make sure it was working—and left it up to Future Cano to find a better place for it later.

For now, it was finally time to open their present. Cano gently slid the box cutter along the top of the box, wondering what kind of chair would take up so much space yet weigh so little—at least compared to what a chair was supposed to weigh. Was it made of super-light materials? Was it one of those space-age fabric chairs with minimalist supports? Maybe it was...

"Oh," Cano said as they opened the box.

It was a bean bag. A round, person-sized bean bag. A bright orange, neon dayglow, see-it-from-space-through-the-blackout-curtains bean bag.

"I guess that makes sense," Cano said as they unceremoniously upturned the box, dumping the bead-filled pouch onto the floor with a satisfying crunching sound. A small folded piece of cardboard fluttered down to the ground next to their feet, a tiny flourish to cap off the unboxing.

They scratched their head. How was this going to work? Maybe they ought to wheel their chair back in from where they'd tucked it away. After all, this whole thing had taken way more time than they'd expected and it was almost time for—

*Beedeeboop! Beedeeboop!*

Cano quickly stepped over to answer the call on their computer and switch the mic back on.

"Hey," a quiet voice said. "Ready to stream?"

"Uh, hey Double," Cano replied, scratching their head as they looked over their makeshift working space. As they pondered the logistics of it, their stomach growled in protest. They'd really worked up an appetite setting all this up; they should probably get some food. Treat themselves, even. "Yeah, just... give me a few minutes."

"Mm. We'll wait."

# Stream of Consciousness

"Gosh, this is going so fast now," Janice said, sketching out the next page of *Life in Furgatory*. "Thanks again for helping me set it up, kiddo!"

Cano clicked over to their voice modulation software and turned it on, a well-practiced routine by that point. It was bad enough they had to listen to the sound of their own voice, they figured; better that no one else did. "No problem," they said as they went back to their art program, hoping to shake off the lethargy that always followed a big meal.

They stared at the empty canvas of a new file. What to do. Viewers were starting to come in, so it ought to be something interesting to see. They wanted new folks to stick around, and come back next time. That was the point of these group art streams, right? That and the company.

Cano took a deep breath, stared beyond the page before them, and began splashing some colors around. Might as well get started on that shark girl commission, nothing too difficult.

oh I love these colors  
really nice mood

"Chat is right, those *are* some nice blues," Janice said. "Is that for your new sona?"

"No, it's not mine," Cano replied, "I opened up a couple of slots earlier. Shark on the beach, under a palm tree."

"Oh, I see." Janice paused. "Isn't your sona a shark, though?"

"Uh, no."

"Armadillo," Double said.

"What? No." Cano furrowed their brow. They had half-heartedly tried multiple fursona designs over the past few years, but nothing ever felt quite right. Invariably, a month or two would pass and they'd revert their user image back to their logo. "Where'd you get that from?"

"You're a fuzzy armadillo in *Other world Online*."

"No, that's moss, not fur," Cano corrected, loading up their character profile. "They're a construct. They roll up into a big rock, see?" They dragged the summary picture onto their stream feed.

Name: Cano\_Pics  
Species: Lithopian  
Gender: a great big shrug  
Pronouns: any  
Class: Protector  
Level: 80

"Wait, your avatar's face shows up as a big shadow on the website too?" Janice asked. "I thought my game was just buggy."

"It's a glamor effect for Lithopian characters," Double explained. "We helped them grind for it."

"Yeah, I just, uh... like silhouettes," Cano said. "They're neat. Straightforward. You know?"

"That is a neat effect!" Janice said. "I'll take a closer look once we go back to the game streams. I'm glad we're taking a vacation from those until they release the new stuff. MMOs are fun, but the next thing you know they take over your life."

"Hah, yeah," Cano said. "I could use a break, to be honest."

"So, is your sona a golem?" Janice asked.

"No, my sona's..." Cano trailed off. "I'm still working on it."

"Still? Need some help?"

"I'm good, I just... need some time. Besides, I should have a lot more of it now that the hell commission is done, right?" They cleared their throat, going back to their current artwork in progress. "Anyway. Shark on the beach." Cano flipped their stylus around and tapped it against the edge of their tablet, eyes focusing nowhere in particular. Shark on the beach, under a palm tree. They had an idea for the pose, they knew where they were going with the character design, and they could use the tree's shade to show off their latest lighting tricks.

So what was the holdup?

"I have no idea what a palm tree looks like," they finally said.

"What?" Janice said, stifling a laugh. "Don't tell me you've never watched cartoons."

"No, I mean, I know what a cartoon palm tree looks like, I just don't like to abstract an abstraction. That's how important details get lost."

"It's not the focal point of the pic, though, is it? Who cares if it's a little inaccurate?"

"I care," Cano said softly. "I wanna do this right."

"Mm hmm." Janice sounded unconvinced.

Cano paused. "...and I don't want people to think I don't know what a palm tree looks like," they finally admitted.

"Hah! But you *don't* know! You just said so!"

Cano audibly grumbled. They were about to come up with some sort of friendly retort when there came a flood of reference pictures and mood boards in the text chat they had open on their second monitor. "Oh. Thanks, Double."

"Mm," Double said.

"Uh, wow, that's a lot. Where in the world...?"

"We did some research last week."

"Oh yeah!" Janice interjected. "I remember that one! You did a shark too. Gosh, they're really in style lately, aren't they?"

Double made another noise of assent as they continued working on the group pic they'd been putting together over the past few streams.

"I'm a little jealous," Cano said as they looked over at the results so far. "That's so many characters. It'd take me months."

"We learned to work fast," Double replied. "You learned to work well."

"Now now, kids, in this stream we don't knock down our own work," Janice said. "You're both wonderful. To each their own!"

"Yeah," Cano said with a self-conscious chuckle. "Alright."

"Mm."

Cano leaned back. Double had sent them so many kinds of palm trees, they didn't know where to begin. Hm. Well, the commissioner hadn't asked for a specific type, so maybe they should just go with what looked best for this. Cano always did like those big poofy bundles of fronds shaped like umbrellas; they were fun to draw. And the trunk was easy, just needed to draw a nice curved line. And then undo it, and redraw it, and do that about a hundred times until the perfect pen stroke revealed itself.

Cano leaned back some more, trying to select an objectively ideal palm tree from the sea of images. They tilted their head to one side, shifted to the other, and then desperately tried to counter-shift until they were unceremoniously ejected from their bean bag chair with a thud.

"Everything okay over there?" Janice asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Cano said as they carefully maneuvered themselves back into their seat. "Just figuring out the new chair is all."

"Oh wow, did you set all that up today? How's it working out for you?"

Cano took a deep breath and looked around.

They were seated considerably lower than they used to be, their head barely poking up above their desk. Thankfully, the new tablet arm mount could reach practically down to the ground, so they could still work. It's not like they ever used their webcam, so who cares if it was pointed way too high now? It was a bit of an awkward position to be in, but...

"It's alright," Cano finally said. "Weird but comfy."

Oh, how comfy it was.

"Is the sun shining indoors now?" Janice asked.

"Not yet. The lamp is set up, but I haven't turned it on yet."

"Why not?"

Cano opened their mouth to answer, but no sound came out. On second thought, the truth would be too embarrassing to admit. They'd just forgotten about it. It was the classic situation of waiting until the right time to do something, and only remembering once it was way too

late. It's not like it could do any harm now, though. Could it? "I dunno," they finally replied, "it's already dark here. It'd feel weird. Wouldn't it, like, mess with my circadian rhythm or something?"

"Winter is messing with your circadian rhythm already," Double said.

"Hey now, it's not winter yet," Janice added. "Let us fall-enjoyers enjoy fall."

Cano gave it some thought. Well, why not, at this point? "I'll give it a shot." With that, they picked up their phone from its new resting place on the floor and turned on the lamp's wireless outlet.

And then there was light.

"OW!"

So much light! Cano shielded their eyes as their apartment flooded with daylight—or something close to it. Goodness, that thing was powerful!

"You okay there, kiddo?"

"Yeah, I'm... wow, this lamp is something else."

"Hah, told you!" Janice said, triumphant. "This ought to turn your dreary days around."

"Maybe," Cano said as their eyes grew accustomed to the focused brightness. "I guess you could be on to something. Just gotta move a bit so I can see my screen and... there."

Once they tilted the tablet to an angle that spared it from the glare, the situation became entirely bearable. Enjoyable, even? Although it didn't quite feel like a summer day, Cano was quickly able to put aside the impending doom of approaching winter.

This was nice.

The rest of the evening flew by; before Cano knew it, Janice was already heading to bed, and Double was wrapping up their stream for the night. Much to the chagrin of the stream's chat, as usual.

yall gonna stream tomorrow

"Hmm, maybe," Cano said as they saved and closed the shark pic. They looked at the pile of cardboard and green packing peanuts that their little office overhaul had produced. "I've got some stuff to take care of, so we'll see."

is cano gonna apply for FurCAF

Cano paused.

Conventions. They were a lot. The money was good, usually, but only if enough people came by the table. And that would mean dealing with them. Still, the more time that passed since Cano's last appearance in person, the bigger the risk of fading from memory, and *that* was terrifying in its own right.

They rubbed their eyes. When was FurCAF again? Soon, right? They

checked the calendar. The dates had just been announced: early spring. Just a few months from now.

Way too soon.

"Maybe next year," Cano said before saying their goodbyes and ending the stream.

They leaned back with a sigh and pulled their hoodie down over their head. They'd waited too long to sign up again. There was technically still plenty of time, but fall was already here and that tended to give Cano cold feet when it came to travel.

"Ugh," they said to no one in particular. Why were they like this? FurCAF was a fun time for Summer Cano, but signups for it being so far in advance meant that Winter Cano had to muster up the strength to fill out the application. And that was a task and a half. If only they'd set a reminder to do the paperwork in advance while it was still sunny outside, none of this would be a problem. Ah well. For now at least, it was sunny *inside*.

And then the world went black.

Cano stumbled to their feet and lifted their hood, knocking their tablet out of the way in the process. The jostle brought their computer out of sleep mode—their knee probably hit one of the shortcut buttons or something—and the soft light of the monitor was enough to illuminate the room.

Oh. The lamp had gone out.

Must've been the timer, Cano mused. They laid back down and reached for their phone, tapping their way through the lock screen and flipping over to the smart outlet app. Sure enough, it was bedtime.

Cano sighed loudly. They were tired, no doubt about it; if they so much as got into bed, they'd be asleep within seconds. It was the lead up to that moment that was such a hassle. They looked over to the small hallway leading to the bedroom, then back to their computer, and back to the lamp. So many little physical exertions multiplied together. A hard sell, considering this bean bag was the most comfortable thing they'd sat on in ages. Maybe a few more minutes.

They looked down at their phone again and turned the lamp back on, overriding the timer and filling their apartment with light and warmth once more. This was nice. The surprisingly comfortable bean bag, the gentle hum of the humidifier bubbling away...

Cano pulled their hoodie down over their face again, tucked their hands into their pockets and closed their eyes. There'd be time enough to leave this spot once they'd gotten their energy back.

"Maybe next year," they said with a chuckle before drifting off to sleep.

# Artistic Growth

Cano toiled away at the shark girl pic. Not that this was hard; ever since this new design had made the rounds a while back, people had been lining up for a commission of their own. No, the thing giving Cano trouble was still the tree in the background. They took a deep breath, stared beyond the canvas, and... No, it still wasn't right.

Why were they so obsessed with it? They just as easily could've skimmed on the details. The beach was the important part, after all. But Cano knew they couldn't phone it in. That wasn't what they were about! Every commission deserved their A-game. Or at least, that's what made the most sense right now.

Cano sifted through the pile of references Double had shared. Turns out there were a lot of different kinds of palm trees? What was supposed to be a quick reference check turned into an all-too-familiar deep dive into every kind of tropical tree on Earth. A dive made all the more difficult by Double's thoroughly confusing handwriting on some of the mood boards included in the picture folder. After repeated attempts at parsing the names of each tree, Cano gave up and just focused on the visuals.

There was a lot to make each kind of palm unique: the general shape, where it liked to thrive, the pattern of their fronds, what their flowers were like... Palm trees had flowers? Fascinating! It made sense, though, considering the fruit and all.

Again and again, though, Cano found themselves coming back to one picture in particular. Its scientific name had stood out when they first glanced at the image collection because it had the word *phoenix* in it, but now they couldn't quite remember the rest of the word. Ah well, there was no need for names right now; they had a visual reference, and that was plenty.

It was such an interesting tree! Not quite as uniform as the stereotypical palm tree, having a clear separation between the lower classic trunk and a smoother, greener upper half that ended in a handful of leafy branches splaying out from the very top. The spot where both halves met was where the flowers would grow. Cano wondered when that was. Flowers grew in spring, right? But was there even a spring under the perpetually sunny sky of this beach, with practically no clouds in sight? Did seasons even matter?

Cano walked up to the tree to get a closer look, to look up at its faraway branches, to sit down where it was dipping its roots, to curl up at its base. Half in the shade and half in the sun, at once refreshed by



the underlying cool air and comforted by the warmth of a sun that would not dare move from its spot.

Ah, to let this sand and soil be your blanket, to let the bubbling whispers of the sea rock you to sleep. This little paradise was world enough for now.

Time was such a flexible thing when you were in the zone. Raindrops could hang in the air just as easily as stone could wear away in the blink of an eye. It was so easy to let go, to loosen your grasp on the needs of the everyday, and let your senses float away. Burrow into the now, and let layer upon layer of soon and later pile up.

In such a state, bringing yourself back to reality became less of an involuntary reflex and more of a task. A surprisingly tricky one, too. Still, all it took was sustained effort: the present moment was there, warm and waiting, just above the metaphorical topsoil. All you had to do was reach up, and up, and inch your way out toward it. But you could take it at your own pace. What was the rush, after all? There was plenty of time to...

What was Cano doing?

They struggled to remember. They were working on something, right? A drawing? No, the stream was over, they'd gone to bed. No, wait, they hadn't! What then? If they hadn't gone to bed, where were they? It was so difficult to focus. Painful, in a way.

In the back of their mind was that nagging resolve to get up, and it wouldn't let itself be ignored any longer. How long had they been sleeping, anyway? Everything that mattered felt like it had happened ages ago.

Cano stretched limbs that felt like they'd been sleeping their entire life. How did you wake from a dream again? And even if you figured out how, what if slumber didn't want to let you go? Could you climb your way out and escape, even if you wanted to? Or would you keep repeating this act of reaching up, of stretching out, of pushing away from the numbness and pulling yourself toward the waking world, like an electrical current blazing new paths down dormant nerves? If reality itself decided to play keep-away with your conscious self, where would it end?

Cano didn't know.

They weren't sure if they were awake and confused, or wrestling with the most stubborn dream of their life. But they could feel warmth and light somewhere up there, and that felt more real than anything else. There was no other option but to do what made the most sense: to reach out toward it, to meet the sun halfway. To trade the cozy mystery of the dream for the refreshing comfort of reality.

To embrace the blinding heat of the present moment, and be reborn in its flames.

# Shifting Awake

The first thing Cano remembered upon waking was feeling the warmth of the sun.

Wait, not the sun. The sun *lamp*, which they'd just installed the day before. Had they fallen asleep under it after the stream, sprawled out on the new bean bag? Goodness, that thing really had been worth the money; probably better that they hadn't gotten an actual chair after all. It took something very comfortable for Cano to pass out like that.

Comfortable or not, they mused, it was a little worrisome that it cut off circulation like that. Cano felt like their whole body had fallen asleep. They were used to the occasional limb being numb in the morning, so while there was no reason to panic, this *was* worrisome. Better to shake themselves awake and let the prickling ants work their way—

Nothing.

Time to shake themselves *awake*, and—

No?

Now would certainly be the time for a little panic, but somehow Cano felt no reason to freak out. They were so wrapped up in coziness that it felt like they had all the time in the world. How were they sprawled out, exactly? Maybe they'd turned around in their sleep a few times. They looked down at—

Or at least, they tried to.

Cano was still not panicking, to be clear, but they felt dangerously close to it. What on earth was going on? Were they still asleep? No, the fog was gone, their memory was sharp. They were thinking clearly.

What, then?

Had they gone blind? They'd avoided thinking about that particular possibility—besides, there had been no warning signs to that effect in the lamp's sparse documentation—but now they were starting to run out of alternative explanations. As they pondered this, though, something felt off. If they couldn't see, then their eyes would presumably still work in some fashion, right? But it was as if they couldn't even open them to begin with. Hrm.

Could your *eyelids* fall asleep? Did that even happen?

It seemed ridiculous. How bad at sleeping would they have to be to somehow end up in a position where they cut off circulation to their eyelids?

Cano tried to focus. Willed their eyes to open, to blink, to—

Aha!

That had done it. Though it took great effort, Cano's eyelids slowly

lifted; first the right one, then the left, as if this was the first time they'd done so in their life. Goodness, the crud that must have accumulated for it to be this hard. Cano would've felt more embarrassed about it had they not been distracted by what they were seeing before them.

They were in a... cave?

Some sort of sunlit cave, but... no, that made no sense. They had gone to bed in their apartment, they were sure of that. This was somewhere else entirely. Why were they here? At the center of a spotlight in this pit of soil, surrounded by smooth, pale rocks? The natural walls of dirt extended up into a darkness that Cano couldn't make out against the stark contrast of the sun beaming down on them. At least they didn't have to shield their eyes; their jacket's hood was still up. Presumably. They would've liked to get a better look, but they couldn't even crane their head up. All they could move was their eyes.

That alone was something to panic about, wasn't it?

Cano took the time to roll this thought around in their head. Why were they so calm? The situation was worrisome. They just weren't freaking out about it, and that seemed out of character. Was this some sort of moment of clarity? A boon granted by the best night's sleep they'd had in years? Sleep well enough and even waking up in a strange place unable to move won't make your heart beat out of your chest—

Cano paused.

Their heart wasn't beating out of their chest. Or quickly. Or... at all, for that matter.

Cano proceeded to *not* freak out about this *so much* that they promptly passed out.

# Creation Workshop

"Nah dude, I get it!" Vernon said as his character tried out new emotes in Toebean Plaza, one of the more stable places to hang out in *Other world Online's* hub town before tackling the game's dungeons. "If you're gonna stare at a character's butt the whole time, it might as well be a hot one, right?"

Cano scrambled for their mouse and repeatedly clicked on the randomize button, discarding the character they were working on and burying her features beneath multiple layers of entropy. "I-I dunno," they finally said quietly, doing their best to sound unconvinced. "I guess."

"You gonna be ready soon? I need the character IDs to send to my dev pal so we get the bonus stuff."

"You know someone on the development team?" Janice asked.

"Heck yeah! I met one of them at the last Team Ourobros sponsor mixer, we really hit it off."

"Just give me a minute," Cano replied. They took a deep breath, then hit the randomize button a few more times. Maybe they'd land on something inspiring. It had been so long since the last time they played a game like this one; they'd forgotten what part of it they enjoyed enough to stick with it.

"Gosh, this reminds me of my *Neverjourney Online* days," Janice said as her character walked around, applauding nonstop. "Look at all these bells and whistles! And you're saying this game isn't even out yet?"

"Nah, this is exclusive early access," Vernon said. "Only the best for my buds! Viewers are gonna eat it up."

"Maybe it'll get some of them interested in our art streams," Janice mused as her character struck an exaggerated pensive pose. "Could use some new folks to mingle in with the old guard, keep things fresh."

"Yeah, for sure!" Vernon paused. "Okay good, hearing back from Double and Nell. They're on their way. Heck yeah, it's all coming together!"

"How are you doing, kiddo?" Janice asked, walking over to the shapeless portal serving as a placeholder for Cano's character.

"Working on it," they replied as they hit the randomize button once again and looked at the resulting pregenerated character. No, he was too buff. Randomize. He wouldn't do either; too ferocious-looking. Randomize. Oh hey, she might be...

Hmm.

Cano took a deep breath and shook their head. No, they had a

following to think about. Better not have folks start up the rumor mill again. They made a mental note to draw her later though; she might make a good adoptable. Cano smiled. Or they could just keep her to themselves, like so many others. When *were* they gonna start that comic, anyway? Maybe just a few more commissions, and there'd be enough of a buffer to free up enough time.

Randomize. For now, they'd—

Oh hey, Cano said to himself. Wait a minute.

The character on-screen was some sort of rock person, but not a stereotypical golem. More like an earth elemental, maybe? A creature of stone held together by soil and vines, with some more decorative greenery here and there. Cano cycled through the cosmetic options a few times, settling on a nice, cozy moss cape. There. Not too gendery. Vague enough to work.

"I think I'm ready," they finally said.

# Breaking Ground

It was some time before Cano woke up to a familiar, yet slightly different, scene. They were still buried in that strange pit, but something had changed. They took a moment to get their bearings. Eyes were working, check. Heart... wasn't, check. The cave hadn't gone anywhere, to be sure, but had it gotten smaller? And while Cano still couldn't lift their head, it felt like the ceiling had gotten lower—if the brightness shining down through that skylight was any indication. A bit more and maybe they could take a peek through the hole, and look outside. What kind of cave shrunk, though? That didn't make sense, unless...

Unless they were getting taller.

Cano reflexively tried to look down at themselves, but no, that wasn't possible either. How frustrating. Of course, this only brought up more questions: what *could* they move? Were they standing or sitting down? Was this some sort of astral projection? That last one seemed a little far-fetched, but Cano was running out of possible explanations for their predicament.

It wasn't that they couldn't feel their body, but rather that it felt distant, or dormant, in a way. It was hard to shake that ever-present feeling of deep relaxation.

But try to shake it they did. Cano tried standing on their tiptoes, rolling their shoulders, and stretching their neck to get a better view at their body—all to no avail. None of their muscles responded.

What would do it, then?

Cano took a moment to reflect. What had worked before, if anything? They closed their eyes, thinking back to when they first woke up in this strange place... no, before that! Their strange dream. The feeling of reaching up, and up, and further up, of embracing the all-consuming warmth and touching the sun itself.

Maybe they were still dreaming. Maybe all this was some sort of test, a visualization exercise put on by a feisty subconscious.

Cano closed their eyes and tried to repeat those motions once again. Focus on the heat, drink in every drop of sunlight, and chase after it.

They lost track of time.

Not that there was an easy way to measure it down there, truth be told. Regardless, once it felt like an adequate amount of it had passed, Cano opened their eyes again.

Orange. Bright orange, dune after dune of it, as far as the eye could see.

What? Cano blinked, unsure of what they were seeing. They had

made it to the opening, of that they were certain; a glance below confirmed as much. But whatever they were expecting to see once they made it to the surface, this wasn't it. What on earth was this vivid color?

Oh no. Oh no no no, Cano repeated to himself as realization dawned. If *that's* what it was, then the sun... They looked up gingerly, wary of being blinded by the everpresent bright light above them. Thankfully, their hair blocked out most of it, giving some much-appreciated shade.

Huh, Cano thought. Did that grow too? Well. That one wasn't so bad, they conceded.

But there was no mistaking it. That wasn't the sun; that was the lamp. This was their apartment. They'd been home all this time, down on the floor, somehow partially buried in their new bean bag chair. That meant that they were still in front of...

Cano turned away from the light and looked at their computer desk. And although they would later confirm that this is what they were seeing, the sheer, colossal scale of their familiar working space loomed so far above them that it defied any sort of measure their mind could process at the moment.

Cano closed their eyes shut, and retreated into the numbing comfort of the dark.

# Branching Paths

"Gosh, can you imagine?" Nell said, peeking down over the cliff's edge into the valley below. "That was us a while back."

Even at this hour, new players were awake, making their way through the carefully constructed obstacle course that was the *Other world Online* tutorial area. Cano could see them even from this height, tilting the camera around their avatar to watch the tiny nametags zip around in the distance. Practically on autopilot, they directed their avatar from plant to ore cluster, gathering whatever was ready for the harvest. They returned to hand over Nell's share of crafting resources, and she quickly got to work grinding and weaving them into brand new equipment.

"I still can't believe this is the same place," Cano said, sitting their character down close to the edge. "It's all one big connected map. They must have planned this, right? After weeks of gameplay, you finally make it through one of the most high-level areas in the game, step outside and bam! You're back in the riverlands, face to face with Peace Mountain."

Cano pointed to the prominent landmark far in the background, so named because its split peak looked like a peace sign. They couldn't remember what had shaped it like that; there was a big battle long ago and then... something something lore explosion.

They looked back at the fresh new heroes below, all of them running around and taking in the sights for what was likely their first time here. "Look how far we've come."

"Heck yeah!" Nell said as she tried on one of the new pieces of gear she'd just built with the night's haul. "By the way, thanks for helping out with this, I appreciate it. There were guides on how to solo it but I just don't have that kind of time, you know?"

Cano replied with a thumbs-up emote—or at least, the almost comical approximation of it their mossy rocklike character could muster. They stretched in their chair, their gaze leaving the computer monitor and coming to a stop on the bare walls surrounding it. Gosh, how they missed this. Being with friends, existing together, creating together. *Other world Online*, despite its flaws, was the closest thing they had to that experience in their life right now, and that made it all the more precious. "No problem, it's always fun to hang out."

"To be honest, I'm surprised you're up at this hour. I thought I was the only one staying up way too late." She laughed and added, "I hope I'm not rubbing off on you too much!"



Cano stared at the screen with a quiet “heh” kept mostly to himself. Nell’s remark had hit a little too close to home. There was no denying she had been a big inspiration back when they’d met in a long-since-defunct art forum, so many years ago.

“Do you still sketch in that notebook?” Cano asked absent-mindedly.

“Huh?” Nell replied. She stopped and looked in Cano’s direction—well, the direction of their character, at least. Not that it mattered to their private voice call. “Oh, *that* notebook! Eh, not really. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious!” Cano quickly answered. “I guess my train of thought ended up at the imageboard.”

“Ohh, that old place! Wow, it’s been how many years? Feels like forever. That was right before I doubled down on a lot of big decisions. Software engineering, moving houses...” she chuckled. “Estrogen.”

Cano laughed, despite themselves. They returned their gaze to the starting valley.

Nell walked over and joined them with a hearty friendship shoulder clap, an emote from the latest update. “Gender, right?” she said with a grin that Cano could hear.

“Yeah,” they replied. Those big life changes had happened around the time Nell had stopped drawing, citing a lack of time. She had continued commissioning Cano, though, which they were very grateful for; it had helped the two of them stay in touch over the following years. Cano had made some personal strides themselves, to be sure; they’d made art a career, and moved out on their own at long last. But there was one aspect of their big life overhaul that they hadn’t quite figured out, even now.

Nell sat down next to Cano’s character, looking out at the scenery with a wistful sigh.

Cano liked to tell themselves that gender was something they were figuring out at their own pace. That’s what they told anyone who asked, especially during the occasional art interview, in the hopes it would get them to drop the subject. It wasn’t one they liked talking about. All these years, and it felt like they weren’t any closer to figuring things out.

Not that Cano had much motivation to dig deeper. At this point, introspection was like peeling an onion: so many layers and they all left you in tears. Besides, all they did anymore was sit alone in their apartment and draw, hiding behind a procession of avatars that people had grown comfortable with. What did it matter if they didn’t like what they saw in the mirror, when no one else had to see it?

Besides, Cano was so many things already. Updating their bio and telling everyone about the ‘questioning’ thing ended up being a much bigger step than they expected. To go any further would probably require more courage than they could ever muster.

"I guess it's been a while since I've drawn anything," Nell mused.

"Mmmhmm," Cano replied absentmindedly.

Hadn't they settled on something that worked for them, anyway? People had warmed up to using any pronoun to refer to them (though some, like Vernon, used it as justification for not changing in any way). Cano himself had found some cozy comfort in 'they.' Maybe as a result of that, it was also the one others tended to use the most. While the feelings it brought were better than any that came before, they didn't quite live up to the elation or relief that Nell, Double, or even Janice had talked about. But Cano had long since learned to take a win, no matter how small, lest it wither away or turn into a loss. Anything but that.

This was fine. Good, even! Something a bit more comfortable that *stayed* comfortable? They should count their lucky stars. What if they committed to something else, and it didn't last? What would everyone else think? Cano was so scared of having to give up what they had, even though it might not be perfect. They didn't want to risk letting go of it, even for a moment.

This internal debate would sprout back into their mind every so often. Cano wondered if it ever had in Nell's, too. How had she been so certain of herself?

Cano took a deep breath. They were talking one-on-one so rarely nowadays, they weren't sure when another chance like this would come along. Maybe Cano could put together enough courage to ask about it, at least.

"That's alright, though," Nell added calmly. "I'm happy with the choices I've made."

"Were you ever afraid of not picking the right one?" Cano blurted out, heart beating a mile a minute.

Nell was silent for a bit. "Of course I was," she finally answered with a laugh.

"Really?" Cano asked with bated breath.

"Yeah! Who isn't?" she said, still chuckling. "It's totally normal. It's why you try stuff in the first place."

Cano stared at the two characters sitting next to each other on-screen, the soft light of the monitor giving the whole room an eerie glow. This was it; this was the moment. The answer was there, within their grasp. They'd finally know. A huge wave of relief washed over—

"Besides, it's just a job, right?"

Cano's heart seemed to stop mid-beat. "What?"

"I mean it looks like a big deal on the outside but it's still just a career path. So what if it hadn't been right for me? I could've changed my mind, picked up art again if I'd wanted, or gone back into music... Heck, I still could. I like doing what I do, but it doesn't define me, you know? It doesn't have to define any of us."

"Oh," Cano said quietly. "Yeah."

She wasn't talking about gender at all. The conversation topic had shifted without Cano noticing. Nell was talking about her work. Her *work*. Of course that was a hard decision, what a silly thing to ask. Cano's chest tightened. Was there still time to clarify? Explain everything over again? How awkward would *that* be?

No. There was no more courage in the well tonight. Better to just leave that misunderstanding be and just let the rest of the night play out. Try again another time.

Cano looked out on the valley again, thinking back to their first few sessions in the game, exploring their first caverns in the same rock wall they were sitting on top of now. Had they even noticed the people above, looking down? Would they have realized they could just *go there* later, if there hadn't been anyone to prove it could be done?

How had the first ones even done it, in hindsight?

Cano turned back to their friend, who was already checking the gathering spots again. Nell's optimism had always been infectious. Maybe this didn't have to be more complicated than picking a job—Cano's own career path had been straightforward enough. Maybe they just needed more time, and a lucky break. Keep gathering up that courage, and wait for the chance to look a bit deeper. Sooner or later, another opportunity might present itself.

Maybe next year, Cano thought.

# Root Awakening

Cano was so comfortable here. Wrapped up in the balmy heat of the tropical sun, nestled at the base of that fascinating tree, taking a well-deserved break in its protective shade. The air was thick enough with warmth to sleep standing up.

They let the rhythmic bubbling of the nearby waves rock them to new heights of peace as they wiggled their toes in the sand, intermingling them around those of the great tree.

Wait. No, that's not what toes did. Toes were small and there were only ten of them, five per... side? What was the word again? And besides, toes were all in front, not all around and way too long and branching off in every direction underground. Not like roots. The big tree was the one with roots. Right?

Cano craned their neck, searching the distant shapes in the sky. Where was that tree? Had they imagined it? That swaying canopy of leaves, their faithful shield against the direct dazzling rays of the sun, it was there and real enough, wasn't it? How else to explain it?

Wait. They were dreaming again. Cano closed their eyes and tried to focus. Why was it so hard to keep their head straight?

Home. Right! They were at home. Yes, they had worked all night on that commission, the one of... who was it again? There was a shark girl. Or at least, the vague idea of one; they hadn't made it much further than the palm tree. That tree again. Why were they fixating on it so much? They had looked at Double's pics. Found the perfect reference, started drawing it. Then they had taken a break, and lied down on the—

The bean bag!

Cano jolted awake, eyes open wide. That was still fresh in their memory: the bright orange bean bag, spreading out like sand dunes as far as the eye could see. Except it wasn't quite, not anymore. The deflated sack of fabric had an end now, its unmistakable color giving way to other waves of fabric haphazardly strewn about: a hoodie here, a pair of sweatpants there, discarded in heaps that spiraled away into the distance. The floor, whatever shape it was in, was surely beyond all this. Had the bean bag deflated even further? Had it gotten smaller?

They looked down. Had *they* gotten bigger? Again?

That particular possibility left their mind as soon as it entered, pushed out by a more startling cascade of facts: they could move their head! They were standing up! They were encased in... something! Wait, had they been sleeping standing up? How on earth had that happened? Yet there they were, sprouting upright from the middle of the ruptured

bean bag, their entire body—limbs, trunk and all—wrapped in some sort of rugged tube. They tried to wriggle their way out, to no avail. Not because the wrapping was too strong, but because they couldn't make sense of the signals their nerves were sending back.

Again, the idea of their whole body going to sleep came back around to the fore, but that was quickly dismissed. Cano could feel their body. It was just... a very different kind of feeling.

They looked up, then quickly to the side, not wanting to have another panic attack upon seeing their gigantic computer desk. Though they caught a tiny glimpse of it, for some reason it didn't seem quite as colossal this time around. The sun lamp was still there, though; somewhere beyond the canopy of leaves.

Cano blinked. No, wait, the tree wasn't real, it was part of the dream! Were they asleep still? Just how many layers deep were they?! They closed their eyes. Waking up was priority number one, they told themselves. Everything was confusing enough already. They just needed to count to three, take a deep breath, and...

They couldn't breathe.

Not only that, they *weren't* breathing. At all. They hadn't taken a single breath since waking up. If they were truly awake, that is. No heartbeat, no breathing, stuck in place in this weird cocoon... it was too much! This was way too much! They should be panicking, Cano thought, they'd gone over this before. But now they were starting to understand why: there was something serene about not hearing the blood rush to their head, or their heart beat like a drum. It left them a lot of room to just... exist, and take in their surroundings. They looked around, trying to see if there was any clue, any reassuring hint about what was happening to them. As they did so, the canopy of leaves above them swayed along, following their motion.

Cano stopped. Slowly looked up, at first only with their eyes. The leaves were there, perfectly still, pitch-black in contrast to the all-encompassing brightness of the lamp above. Then, they gently tilted their head back. And the leaves followed suit.

"Oh my gosh," Cano would have said if they had been able to speak at that moment. They were the tree.

They were the tree? What??

They shook their head, the leaves above swishing to and fro. That wasn't possible! This sort of thing just didn't happen! This wasn't a TV show, or a movie, or a book... was it? For some reason, they really didn't want to risk going too far down that particular hole. Maybe this wasn't unheard of? Maybe they'd been cursed, or made a wish without realizing it, or... no, no, none of that made sense at all! This was the real world. None of that ever happened.

And yet.



And yet, Cano thought, transfixed by the sight of the parasol of fronds hanging above them. And yet here they were. They looked down, panic quickly deflating into disappointed resignation. Why this? Why a tree, of all things? If it was possible to be something else, then why couldn't they have been a... Well, maybe not a cat, that felt a bit played out. Wolves weren't their thing. Shark? No, no, no kind of fish; the mere concept of going underwater gave them nightmares. Something with wings? ...Any mammal at all?

Cano pantomimed a sigh as best they could. This was the fursona discussion all over again. Nothing ever appealed to them. Nothing ever felt right. No option they tried, be it in a drawing or in a game, ever kept their interest for more than a day or two. Maybe this was why. Maybe this was some sort of divine punishment.

For what, though? For not liking winter? Trees weren't the biggest fans of winter either. What a strange sentence to hand down to someone with seasonal depression.

Maybe this really did make no sense, Cano mused. But whatever the explanation, one thing was certain: they were in their living room, they were alive, and they were safe, at least for the time being.

That was a start.

# Lobby Drop-Off

Cano woke with a start as the unexpected bluster of the door buzzer nearly threw them off the couch. They stumbled to their feet and made their way to the wall almost entirely on autopilot, pressing the intercom button. "Yeah?" they asked blearily.

"Postal service!" came the reply.

"Oh. Right. Okay. Sorry," Cano said, getting their bearings back enough to figure out which of the buttons unlocked the door. They held it down for what seemed to be a reasonable amount of time, and sure enough, they soon heard footsteps coming up the communal stairs. Gosh, how long had they been napping? They really hoped they hadn't slept through their—

They scrambled to the door, opening it on the third knock and finding themselves face-to-box with their latest housewarming present to themselves. Or was this more of the basic supplies they'd ordered the week before? It was getting hard to keep track.

"Sign here, please," the postal worker began to say, pausing as she glanced at the screen of her handheld device. She furrowed her brow. "Cano Pics?"

"It's uh, just Cano," they replied. They glanced at the taller person in front of them, sheepishly averting their gaze before there was any risk of eye contact. "It's a... an artist thing."

"Ahh, gotcha." She scanned the label and handed over the scanner with one hand and a stylus with the other. "Sign here please, Cano."

"Yeah, sure, of course." They scribbled their usual signature and quickly handed everything back, taking possession of the box. "Thank you, uh..." Cano searched for a few uncomfortable seconds before finding her nametag. "Renée."

"No problem!" she replied with a smile. "Nice to meet you!" She glanced down at the considerable quantity of empty boxes just inside the door. "And welcome to the neighborhood."

"Oh, uh, thanks!" Cano said. "I guess Moving Day must be pretty busy for you all, what with so many people moving."

"Eh, you get used to them! More open doors, but more trucks on the road." Renée said as she tapped through some menus on her scanner. She gave a quick look down the hall. "Seems like it's moving day for the walls, too."

Cano followed her gaze. "Oh yeah, the landlord just finished the renovations like, yesterday. This was all still one big apartment back when I visited." They looked around the cramped lobby, still with



unfinished walls, but with a functional door. "Now I get my own tiny lobby. It's pretty neat."

"Fancy," Renée added as she acknowledged another loud beep from her device. She put it back into her pocket. "So this here's the box with tracking. I have another one for you downstairs, I'll be right back."

"Oh sure, I'll be—"

*Beedeeboop! Beedeeboop!*

Cano blanched as they looked back at the video call coming in on their computer, then back at the postal worker quickly vanishing down the stairs. "Uh! Hey! Wait!" they shouted.

"Yeah?"

"I have a, uh, a meeting thing—can you just leave the box up here?"

Renée paused at the bottom of the steps. "You sure?"

"Yeah, it's fine! You can just close the door after."

There came a chuckle. "Okay! Tiny lobby it is."

"Thank you! Thank you! I'm sorry!" Cano yelled down the stairs as they made a quick dive back into their chair to answer before the call automatically dropped.

# Limbering Up

Cano couldn't remember their dream.

That was the first sign that they had been sleeping. When had they fallen asleep? And for how long? No answer was forthcoming. But one thing was for certain: they'd gotten taller again, a little bit.

Every time a day passed—or however long they slept for—Cano would find they'd grown a bit afterward. This time the difference wasn't quite as dramatic as before, but it was still noticeable. Also so was the warmth; while the sun lamp had been providing unrivaled light and heat for days now, the comfort was slowly but surely turning into something harsher. It was getting too warm. Though they had slept a few times, the sun had never set. And that was starting to become a problem.

Wasn't the lamp supposed to turn off at night? They'd hooked it up to that smart outlet specifically for this reason.

Then their eyes went wide. No, that's right! They'd overridden the timer! Right before going to sleep that fateful night.

Cano looked around their ever-steadily-diminishing domain. Their phone. If they could just find their phone, they could turn the lamp off. But wait. Didn't they need it? To... live? Was that how trees worked?

Well. They could at least turn the timer back on, they figured. Get a bit of respite from this eternal sunlight. That felt like a step forward.

The living room still felt alien to them; so oddly humongous, so recognizable in an uncanny way. Their phone had to be somewhere. Where had they left it? On the floor? There was no sign of it. Hm.

The pocket! Their hoodie pocket, of course! They were tall enough to get a better vantage point now. Cano surveyed the dunes of fabric, looking beyond the deflated bean bag and into the grey reaches of their discarded hoodie.

There. It was half-tucked into one of the pockets, barely standing out from the polyester folds lying between them and the shelf that held up the lamp. What a blessing that it was plainly visible like that! Now they just had to reach over and grab it. But... that could be a problem. Trees didn't exactly have arms, did they? How would they ever reach it, much less turn the lamp's timer back on?

"Hold on," Cano would've said. Trees weren't supposed to have eyes either, or a neck—and they definitely had both at that moment. Maybe they had arms, and just needed to figure out where they were? A quick glance left and right dismissed that possibility. But then again... They thought back to when they first opened their eyes. How much effort it had taken, how it felt as if each eyelid had never been lifted before that

moment. Was that embellishment, or an actual fact? Had their eyes existed at all before Cano had opened them?

Could they do that again, but for something else?

They took a deep breath—dang it! Right. No breath. No breath, no breathing, no lungs. No mouth. This was so frustrating. How could they be creative if they couldn't go through the motions they were so familiar with? They frowned, trying again. And again. Maybe if they focused hard enough, they could breathe out of spite alone.

They were about to stop when they felt that telltale tingle, an electric current running somewhere right between their eyes as if a sleeping limb was waking up. Was this it? Was it working? Cano redoubled their efforts. The tiny spark of raw feeling became more and more intense, rising in strength and growing in size until it split in two—and back it swung and down it went, tracing twin lines that intertwined and scratched and pushed and drilled and dug a tiny path that stretched further and further and further until at last it erupted in a triumphant—

*GASP!*

Cano snorted, gave a muffled nasal cough, and breathed out shakily. And in. And out again, and in, and there it was! She'd done it, she could breathe! What a rush! At long last it was finally possible to... to, uh...

Cano froze in place for a moment. Wait. What? They took a small breath, then another, letting the overwhelming wave of raw feeling bubble down to a manageable level. What was *that* all about? They couldn't quite place it, but something had definitely felt *odd* during the euphoric high of getting their lungs back. Or rather, creating new ones? If that's how that worked?

Huh.

Whatever it was, it was gone now, and that was probably for the best. Somehow Cano figured that if they had a heart, it'd be beating too fast right now—and that was something they didn't need. What they *did* need was their phone. First things first.

They turned back to their phone. It wasn't exactly within reach, but it wasn't too far off, either. Maybe their arm would be long enough. It was worth a try, right? What did they have to lose? They reached out.

Predictably, nothing happened. Nothing ever quite worked the first time; that was something Cano had gotten used to by now. It just meant they had to keep trying. And trying. And trying! And...

Nothing. They stared at the phone, so close yet so far for such a small tree. They worried they were asking too much, but it was too early to give up. Maybe Cano was just approaching the problem the wrong way. How had it worked out before? They'd visualized it, pictured what they wanted, and acted as if they were moving a part of their body that they knew well. Maybe they needed to wrap their head around that particular process.

Cano closed their eyes and took a deep breath. If they were a tree—well, they *were*, that part was clear, but *hypothetically*, if they were a tree—where would their arms be? Were they wrapped up in the trunk, waiting to be unfurled? Would they have to be grown from nothing? Or, more simply, what if they were already there?

Cano looked up, to the canopy of leaves swaying right above their head. They thought back to Double's pile of reference pics. The specific tree they'd been obsessing over... What was it called? Something phoenix palm? It had branches, but further up, splitting off from the trunk near the top. Cano couldn't confirm whether that was the case with them too, but they were going to work off of that assumption and try it.

They took another deep breath, picturing in their mind the tree, its fronds, and the small branches leading down from them. They just had to pick two on opposite sides, give them a little wiggle, breathe some more life into them, and...

Cano felt a soft cascade of waves, a gentle swaying from left to right, as they tried over and over again to wrest control of their arms-to-be. Left and right, left and right, left and—right, there it was! The tingle, the feeling of ants crawling up their... shoulder? They really hoped that's what they were feeling. The jolts of electricity gathered in strength before spreading out in search of something, anything...

Ah!

It was like being hit by the world's smallest lightning bolt. The effervescent mass of raw feeling had found something! It lashed out, finding purchase somewhere up above, and then began pulling. On the other side, the same action repeated itself, following the gently swaying motions that had never stopped. Left and right, left and right, gently tugging at the ceiling of leaves, picking two simple lines and tracing over them again and again until they were something... more.

If Cano had a mouth, it would be smiling right now. It was such a wonderful feeling to picture an image in your mind, and then make it real. Just like drawing; it's what made art so appealing for them. Nothing else compared. And now it was happening in a way that was closer and more lifelike than ever before. She was doing it. She was making art!

Cano's eyes opened wide as another nasal gasp shook them out of whatever creative zone they'd fallen into. There it was again! That strange feeling, that intense well of emotion that they recoiled away from as soon as they dipped a toe in. And now, once again, it was gone. They covered their face in embarrassment. Not that anyone was going to see them right now, but still.

Wait. They looked down at their hands. They had hands! Sort of!

Cano breathed in and out, taking in this new sight. They weren't sure if breathing was actually doing anything for them—they seemed to be able to stop without a problem—but it was a nice way to soothe

themselves. And as they breathed out, the fronds on the tip of each limb fluttered in the tiny wind that was created, firmly attached to the soft green appendage.

And they could feel it. What a weird sensation! Cano experimentally flexed their arms, or what passed for arms right now, finding the union of branches and leaves strangely responsive. The fronds had coalesced into finger-like clusters, giving them a pair of... words failed them. They weren't exactly hands, were they? But they were close enough, at least for now. Feelers? Eh, that felt alien. Manipulators? Too mechanical. Whatever, Cano told themselves; hands it was. Not like anyone could argue semantics with them right now.

That said, even an argument didn't sound half bad at that moment. They'd spent enough time by themselves to crave human contact, which was unusual enough without considering all the reality-defying events of the last few days. So, on to their original purpose: getting their phone. It seemed immense, even now, but maybe they could pull it close enough to get it working. Hopefully, it still had power. Cano *had* bought a model that defined itself by its battery life after all.

The answer came sooner than expected as the phone began to ring. At least, Cano assumed it was ringing; the screen lit up, and they could feel its vibration deep in their roots—they made a mental note to unpack *that* particular feeling later—but they couldn't hear the ringtone. Then again, how could they hear it? They didn't have ears. One more thing to add to the to-do list, they told themselves.

With time being of the essence, Cano reached down and grabbed a fistful (frondful?) of the orange bean bag fabric, giving it a solid pull. There was no time to ponder how their arms moved without muscles, or what the deadlift capacity of a palm tree sapling was. They had a way to bring their phone closer and they were going to use it.

A couple of tugs and the hoodie was within reach; a couple more, and the pocket itself was close enough to grab. With one last mightily awkward swing of their arm, Cano shifted the pile of fabric toward them and the phone slipped freely from its hiding place, hitting the bottom of their trunk with a dull *tmp*.

The phone was still ringing; there was still time to answer. Time enough to get ahold of someone, call for help. Cano reached down and tapped the answer button.

At least, they tried—their leafy fingers harmlessly brushed over the screen, undetected. It was made for flesh and blood fingers, after all.

No, Cano thought! They were so close! But all they could do was flail at the screen, accomplishing nothing more than making the leaves above their head shake with the commotion. Then, the ringing stopped. The phone turned off.

And in the dark slab of glass, Cano saw her.



# Opening the Door

It was impossible to look away. Only figuratively, to be clear: Cano had a neck again. But right in front of them, close enough to reach out and touch... there she was.

It all seemed to happen in slow-motion. Their surprise at seeing someone. Someone else. Why here, of all places? Who was she? One part of Cano's mind was still milliseconds away from finding the answer to those questions while another was busy registering the features on her face. Recognizing her traits. A familiar jawline their fingers remembered tracing, eyes they had drawn so many times before, locks of frond-like hair framing her face just the way they liked to draw it on a blank canvas... Wait.

Why was her hair made of leaves? Where was her mouth? Why did her skin have that green tint? *Oh my gosh that's—*

Cano's brain finally caught up in what felt like minutes but in hindsight probably only took a second. That wasn't someone else. That was their reflection. The phone was inescapably tall and it was pointed directly at them. Clear as day, staring back from the other side of the glass, mostly plant but still slightly human... that was her.

Cano's mouth would have been agape, if they'd had one. This wasn't the body they remembered, but it was the one they'd been growing into. Although it was the first opportunity they'd had to get a proper look, with every second that passed they recognized themselves more and more. So many little details here and there, familiar touches they'd always put on their characters whether they were video game avatars or nameless sketches while warming up for an art stream. Parts of a person that they'd draw when they knew no one was looking. And now, put together, all those features had become Cano. Had become *her*.

She couldn't get over the sheer giddiness of it. She'd resisted it for so long, so afraid to even risk thinking those words—those little words that made her heart skip a beat on the very rare occasion someone else chose to use them when referring to her. But now, *now* she'd done it. Thanks to a chance reflection, she'd tricked herself into thinking of herself that way, and there was no going back.

That lady in the mirror was her.

Well, her as a tree person. That detail shouldn't be glossed over. It was kind of a big deal at the moment, actually.

But her present planthood notwithstanding, this was... this was so important! Before, whenever she'd draw a character that bore a passing resemblance to what she looked like now, they would be a separate

entity, a nameless OC they could never possibly be. But now a threshold had been crossed. There was no more hesitation, no more resistance to taking ownership of these traits she had been projecting onto her creations for so long.

Maybe all this time spent gingerly picking away at the question without ever digging too deeply, she knew what the answer was, but had been too scared to say it. Maybe all this time she'd been waiting for permission. The fact that the person giving her permission turned out to be herself, well, that just made Cano shake her head and want to smile. (She should really work on getting a mouth soon.) For now, reality— weird as it was—was staring her in the face, and she wholeheartedly wanted to run with it and see how far she got.

This might not last forever, after all; what if this was some sort of learn-your-lesson curse, and next week she'd be back to normal? Maybe once she was on the other side she'd look back on all this and laugh, like in so many movies. What a horrible thought.

Before she could ruminate on that some more, her apartment door flew open.

Instinctively, Cano flung her arms back up and went rigid, squeezing her eyes shut and just hoping against hope that whatever or whoever had just entered would just ignore her.

She cursed inwardly, angry at just how distractible she was. She still couldn't hear anything, but surely she'd felt the approaching footsteps, the stomping vibrations going up the stairs and getting closer. It was still so hard to make sense of all these new senses.

She focused on the footsteps, for they were still there. Quite close, in fact. She wasn't sure whether she should wince, or curl up, or try to hold still; she was just... rigid. It surprisingly took very little effort. It was also kind of nice! A very familiar, cozy, sustainable state. Being a tree didn't take that much energy, it turned out. And it... didn't hurt? At all? She could just stand there, immobile, as long as she wanted.

Oh *no*, Cano thought as the realization hit her. Had she just... reverted, physically? Was she back to square one? Would she have to re-grow her sight, her touch, remake *everything* all over again? She tried to peek an eye open. Just one, just a little, nothing that would attract attention. Just to see if she still could.

The tingling returned, which would have sent any person who wasn't currently a plant into panic mode. But to Cano's great relief, the lightning coursing through the side of her face was faint and short-lived this time. There was some lethargy to overcome, but she did so easily, and without too much effort she was able to sneak a peek at her apartment. Well, the spot in front of her desk, at least; she was still pointed in that general direction. But it was enough to calm her nerves, if she had any to speak of.



There was still someone in her apartment. She could feel the rumbles of every step as the intruder walked back and forth behind her. They would likely be stories high, a gargantuan shape lumbering across the horizon as far as she was concerned. Maybe it was for the best that she didn't look at them. Even innocuous things were terrifying when they were incalculably larger than you.

There was an odd quality to the air, though, one she couldn't quite put her finger on. She could feel it in her fronds, a faint symphony of vibrations cascading through the air. Was the unwanted guest talking? Is that what that was? If only she could listen, or had a way to make sense of them!

Cano knew what to do. She closed her eyes and focused, taking deep... Hold on. One moment. First, make a nose again, then take a deep breath, and focus on the spots somewhere behind her temples. Her head filled with crisscrossing bolts of electricity as important new pathways laid the foundations for what would be her ears.

The sensations got so intense she had to stop to take a break a couple of times.

But she persevered and visualized what she needed: something simple and flexible, able to capture those important sound waves and funnel them closer. She'd drawn so many different kinds of ears over the years so this should be straightforward. Right? Just make a triangle and curl it a little and—

"—my problem! I called, I did my due diligence!"

There! Sound! Blessed words, coming in clearer and clearer every second! Cano focused on the voice, her elation turning sour almost instantly. It was her landlord. Her landlord was here.

And he was stomping around her apartment with boots on.

Wait, no, that wasn't quite right. He wasn't her landlord anymore. The city had transferred the building over to public housing during that big push not too long ago. He was just the superintendent now. Didn't stop him from walking around like he still owned the place, though, Cano thought as she gritted teeth she didn't have yet.

She froze up again as he stepped closer and worse, stopped next to her. She half-heard, half-felt him shift his posture. Crouch down a bit.

"Huh," the superintendent said. "No, it's just a tree."

Cano hoped he couldn't see her ears. She briefly wondered what they looked like; she'd have to check them out in the glass of her phone once the big guest left. Provided she survived the next few minutes, that is. He was dangerously close. And while he was perpetually grumpy, she didn't think he had it in him to do any sort of property damage. No, that would get him kicked out, and he'd never live it down. But as much as she attempted to rationalize her worries away, there was still a giant man looming over her, and no amount of logic could save you from the

whims of a colossus with a temper.

He stood back up. Took one step back, then another, and another and oh thank goodness he was walking away and Cano could stop holding her breath now.

Not that it took any effort to do so, she realized after the fact.

"I don't care if it's legal, don't grow trees inside!" he said, voice booming as he did a final tour of the apartment. "Trees go outside!"

Cano risked another sidelong glance as she heard him make his way back around to the tiny lobby and open her apartment door.

"Well whatever, I checked, no one here, no answer," he grumbled as he stepped outside. "Not my fault now. Don't come to me with the repair bills!"

SLAM!

Cano waited a moment, then two, then three, and then opened both eyes up again. She craned her neck and looked in the superintendent's wake. He was gone; she was safe. He'd just tracked a bunch of dirt and pebbles into her place—as usual—and made a bunch of rude noise. He'd also left the interior lobby door open, which irked her. She liked to keep that one closed; it made her feel safe, even if only in a superficial way.

And what on earth had he been yelling about? Repair bills? Was something broken? She looked back at her phone. Maybe he'd left a message. She had to find a way to check them. How, though? Smartphone screens couldn't detect branches, only fingers. Or bananas, Cano thought with a mental smirk, although that wasn't going to help much in her current st—

Wait. Right! Right, bananas worked because of conductivity, or something like that. It was an electrical thing. And while she couldn't exactly turn her hand into a banana, she had been filling her extremities with jolts of electricity every time she made a new part of herself. Maybe she could work with that! Right?

She took a deep breath. It was worth a shot, at least.

# Brief Connection

Cano would have been out of breath if she'd actually needed to breathe. She had completely lost track of time, so focused in her attempt to turn on the stubborn device in front of her. Granted, even with perfect focus she'd have been hard-pressed to tell what time it was, much less what day. But then that's why she was doing this: she had to get her nights back.

The phone, frustratingly, refused her every attempt at operation.

Cano wasn't exactly sure how to channel the electricity she'd been feeling whenever she grew something new, but at least by now she'd become well-versed in how *not* to do it. Frustratingly, it seemed to be entirely a byproduct of her own growth process; it wasn't something she could activate on command. And she didn't exactly want to grow a new limb every time she wanted to use her phone.

She held up her hands, gently waving the fine frond clusters that she'd fashioned into fingers. They were functional, for the most part, but certainly didn't have the thickness of a human finger. Was thickness even the issue here?

Argh! Cano wasn't an electrician, or an engineer, and day after day of neverending searing sunlight was starting to overwhelm her. Why couldn't this just work?! It wasn't fair!

*Whap!*

She struck her phone with balled-up fists in a fit of frustration. And the screen turned on.

Wait, Cano thought. That worked? How?? She frantically clawed at the glass surface again, but couldn't quite get the phone to respond. What on earth... Did the motion matter? The impact, maybe? She gently balled up her frond-fingers again and gave the screen a light tap. Nothing. She tried again, with more pressure this time. There, success! Her leafy fingers weren't enough by themselves, but by mashing her fist against the glass she was able to get a consistent result. She put in her password. She was in.

The screen was so big she had to crane her neck up and down, her entire body swaying as she took stock of the flood of information. So many notifications. So many unread badges! Too many to count. She pushed them away and searched for the home interface app, the thing that would finally end this interminable day.

There it was. What once took a quick flick of Cano's thumb now required sliding her entire hand from one side of her body to the other. But it was done, and her living room was once again bathed in blessed

darkness, giving her respite from a sun that had overstayed its welcome far too long. Even the audible whine of the smart electrical plug was gone. She hadn't even realized it had been there in the first place.

The light going out probably meant it was night time, as that's when the automated schedule was supposed to turn it off. She looked at the phone again. What time was it, anyway? It was so hard to tell—

1%

Oh no. *Oh no*. The battery! Had her phone been on this whole time? What could have caused it to drain so fast? This model was supposed to be the longest-lasting between charges! She couldn't plug it back in, not in the shape she was in. She had to think, she had to think fast! Quick, put the phone back into sleep mode!

She reached over and pushed the button with all her might, feeling it press down with the tiniest *click*. Whew. That would give her time to think.

With the phone screen turned off, the apartment was now the darkest Cano had seen it in a while. There were still light sources around—it was hard to escape the tiny LEDs that dotted every electronic device—but none had a reach much beyond their immediate vicinity.

The tiny tree girl sat back and pondered her situation. Or at least, that's what she reflexively tried to do; the ringed trunk that was her lower half tried its best to bend a bit, but couldn't quite pull off the exact motion she was going for. Half-amused and half-bemused by this flexibility, Cano turned back to her dormant phone and looked at the corner where the battery life had been displayed before she turned it off.

One percent. That wasn't a lot. And given that this was the most precise the display could be, there was no telling just how much of that last percent of battery life was left. Did she have minutes? Seconds? Was the phone just a little bit confused about how much capacity it still had? Cano hadn't gone to the trouble of doing a full power cycle in a while. None of that gave her any idea of the kind of time she had before the phone shut itself off.

She craned her neck to look up at her desk. Given how far the computer was, she had a lot of growing left to do to be able to use it again. At least she'd left the art tablet set pretty low on that fancy new ergonomic arm; that'd be the first thing within her reach.

Provided she kept growing. A chilling thought went through her mind: what if this was as big as she got? Never to become bigger than a sapling? What kind of life would she lead? Or, well, she did seem to be some sort of palm person... what if she became as big as a tree? Would that be any better? When would she outgrow her apartment? How would she make *that* work?

Cano rubbed her face. None of this was helping. She had a dwindling

window of time to use the one thing that allowed her contact with the outside world. She had to make the most of it.

She looked back at the screen, thinking through her next steps. Say she barely had seconds; a minute, at most. What should she do with those precious moments?

Call someone? Did she really know anyone in town, beyond local store employees she was on a friendly basis with? Janice was across the continent, Nell was way down south, Double was... an enigma, and—

Cano winced. Right, Vernon was local. Of course he was. The two of them had met at an event that one time, that's what had gotten this whole *Other world Online* group hangout thing started. Is this what it had come to? Was she going to have to call Vern for help?!

She really, really didn't want to. Hanging out online was one thing, but...

Cano took a good, hard look at her current situation. What was happening to her right now, that just *didn't happen*. It was unheard of. She wasn't sure how anyone would react, much less someone whose friendship with her was tenuous at best. There was no telling what they'd do. Yeah, this was a bad idea.

She probably shouldn't let *anyone* know she was a tree right now. People might freak out, or worse, call the authorities. Cano didn't want that. She didn't want anyone she didn't trust coming into her home, much less uprooting her and taking her to goodness-knows-where. She could feel her roots grip down even harder at the thought. There was so much she didn't know about her condition, but one thing was certain: she felt very fragile. And there weren't many people she trusted enough to let into her apartment while she was this way, much less anyone who was local. Much, much less Vernon.

That didn't leave many options. She needed more time! Time to grow, to figure things out, to build some safety for herself. She'd made so much progress since first waking up. She needed to give herself room for a lot more of that before she started telling people about what had happened to her. For now, the most important thing was buying herself more time. Literally!

She shot a quick glance at the patch of darkness where the door leading to her tiny lobby stood—open, still, from the superintendent's careless visit. She could order a battery and have it delivered on the floor next to her, where she could reach it. Renée was used to dropping stuff off past the first door, after all; maybe she could be convinced to take the couple more steps needed to leave the box next to the little tree in the middle of the living room. All Cano had to do was add a note to the order.

Okay. That seemed like a decent plan. Get a battery—something pre-charged, with a cable—and specify where to bring it. Cano visualized

the steps needed to make this happen; she'd only have one shot at this, if she was lucky. There was no telling just how long her phone's charge would hold out. But if she pulled it off, she'd have all the time in the world. And that was worth it. She took a deep breath, balled up her fist, and tapped her phone.

Cano could just picture her little tree self furiously tapping and sliding away at the screen, working like a palm person possessed. Turn on the phone, enter the password, open the Lighthouse shopping app, search for a compatible battery (pre-charged, cable included), add to cart, confirm order, wait for confirmation...

*Wait for confirmation...*

BAM! Done! She was safe! The battery was ordered, and in a few days she'd be able to plug her phone back in and take her time. Cano leaned back, her body gently swaying in place. As she wondered how long her phone had left on its current charge, her eyes wandered over the order confirmation page to double-check she was in the clear. Pre-charged battery, yup. Bonus cable, yes. Estimated delivery, December 2nd.

Wait, what? No! That was way too late! Had she forgotten to request a fast delivery? She glanced up at the details, which confirmed that, yes, she had indeed selected the fastest shipping option. That usually meant a few days at most! What was going on? She looked for the change request button. Maybe there was still time to fix this! Gosh, she couldn't imagine spending months without access to the outside world.

There it was! She craned her neck and looked up at the button in question, high above the page. But as she lifted her hand toward it, she noticed something else:

ORDER PLACED: NOVEMBER 29TH

She slowly uncurled her frond-like fingers in a frozen stupor. No, that wasn't right. It was barely October, it...

It *couldn't* have been two months since this whole ordeal began. Could it? As the reality of Cano's situation dawned on her, the phone shut off, taking with it the last source of light in the room.

# Nightmare Difficulty

Cano ventured further into the darkness, hugging the right-hand wall and tapping the ground ahead to check for pitfalls. This was a bad situation. Bad by design, to be sure, but made worse by a combination of unfortunate luck and sheer bullheadedness on Cano's part. They had forgotten to bring lamp oil, torches, or any fire source at all to Darkenfrost Dungeon. And really, when someone named a dungeon Darkenfrost, you kind of knew what you were getting into.

(To be fair, Darkenfrost wasn't its actual name, at least not in-game. But when enough of the community rallied behind a nickname from the early beta stages, it makes it hard for developers not to start calling it that in official communications.)

The place was, predictably, devoid of light. This was one of *Otherworld Online's* gimmick dungeons where the devs would spend a lot of time and energy designing everything around a core mechanic: in this case, line of sight. Most of the dungeon was pitch-black, and light sources interacted with the halls and their traps in really interesting ways. The ice theme added some gameplay wrinkles that Cano found really clever, especially when it came to manipulating iced-over panels that reflected light in various ways. It was a fun time!

When you were in a full team with folks who knew what they were doing, anyway. This time Cano was alone, in some stubborn quest for a rare treasure that they didn't want to bother the rest of the group for. They'd all gone through and braved this dungeon multiple times anyway. Challenge areas like these were exceedingly deadly for players going solo. The highest difficulty rating, in fact. But Cano knew how to stay out of trouble, and where to go.

At least, they thought they did. They really should have brought some lamp oil. They'd navigated this place in the dark multiple times, but never alone. Had the devs moved the walls since last time? No, that made no sense. The shifting walls were in a different dungeon.

Cano stepped deeper and deeper into the darkness as the corridor they were in opened up into a giant hall, the walls and ceiling far beyond any range they could perceive in this complete darkness. Cano rubbed their hands together for warmth. It had gotten so cold. Was this a new feature? Were they going to lose health if they couldn't get their body temperature back up?

A loud noise from somewhere far below stopped them in their tracks. Then, a gust of wind. Cano froze, rooted in place as thundering footsteps—the first ever-so-distant, but each one closer than the last—

rocked the very foundations of the pitch-black room.

They couldn't see, but they could feel the figure approach, looming taller than any living being should be able to. Standing in front of them. Kneeling down, not to Cano's level, but close. Close enough to bring a singular, massive fist down onto the ground.

WHOOM!

The concussive blast of air was almost enough to bend Cano backwards. Did the figure miss? Or was this a warning shot? They were alone. No backup, no light, no way to call for—

"OHHH," a distant voice rumbled from the darkness above.

Cano could only hold as still as possible as the waves from each word washed over her.

"WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO YOU?"



# A Thorny Problem

Cano awoke in a strange state, lethargic and lost as she slowly reformed the limbs and features that had gone dormant along with her. It felt like she'd gotten up on the wrong side of everything, full of aches and dull throbbing. And not even the familiar aches; this was an all-new terrible sensation that dug all the way down to the roots, piling an extra helping of anxiety on top of the already-not-feeling-great baseline. Old posture stuff rearing its ugly head? No, this didn't feel like it at all. What, then? And whatever it was, would it go away? Would it come back?

She cracked her eyes open. It was still night. Had the lamp's timer turned itself off again? How long had she slept? So many questions. She couldn't remember what she'd dreamed, if anything.

Cano really hoped the lamp's timer wasn't acting up, as her phone was now well and truly out of power. There was no way for her to fix it if that was the case. As she looked up at where she remembered the lamp to be, she realized something else: it was very quiet, and very dark.

No faint rumblings from her computer, no cozy bubbling from the humidifier. Even the usual starlit sky of tiny electronic device LEDs was gone. The apartment was dead silent and the darkest it had ever been.

Had the power gone out?

A deep twinge wrung itself into Cano's belly. Oh no. That was it. The power had gone out. That meant no more sun, no more heat, no more... water. She looked back at where the humidifier was, somewhere out there in the distant darkness. Trees needed water to live, right? She hadn't exactly been watering herself. Had the humidifier been enough to keep her hydrated this whole time?

Well, it certainly wasn't anymore, that's for sure; not in the state it was in. Cano looked down at herself (as much as it was possible to see anything in this situation) and gingerly flexed her arms. Maybe that's why she felt so terrible. Maybe she was dehydrated.

She didn't know much about trees, to be sure. But she knew at least that for them, being dehydrated was *real bad*.

If only her phone wasn't out of power! She could go online, find out what had happened, maybe call in that dreaded worst-case scenario... She tried turning it on, just in case. Maybe it had magically recovered a little bit of charge? She swiped at empty air once or twice before noticing the phone was lower than she'd remembered. Had she grown again?

Her fingers located the power button. She took a deep breath, and pressed it. Nothing, save for the phone's pitiful flashing 'low battery' icon, lighting up Cano's immediate surroundings.

That's when she noticed the box.

Had the delivery come in? When did *that* happen? When she'd been asleep? Thank goodness if that was the case; Cano didn't even want to think about being discovered in her plant girl state. Maybe the notes had worked, and Renée had just dropped it off inside. Had she closed the inner door on her way out? It was hard to see very far in this darkness.

But that was a minor detail, it could wait. Right now there was a more pressing matter: getting her phone charged up. Cano nodded to herself and looked at the box, which was thankfully both within reach and not too big. She reached over with a leafy hand and painstakingly clawed at it to drag it over a little bit more so she could open—

Oh. *Right*.

How was she going to open it?

Cano hadn't thought about that. She looked down at her hands, illuminated briefly right before the phone's screen turned off again. She didn't have nails to speak of that could be used to slice through the tape. And while leafy fingers were proving to do the job somewhat, they had nowhere near the strength or leverage needed to pry open the box's flaps. What else could she do, then?

She looked around, more to help her think than anything else considering how dark it was. How would she open a box, usually? She'd use a knife. But the closest one would be in the kitchen or the hallway closet—both completely unreachable. Alright. So, what else? Keys? No, they were up on the wall. A pen? Up on the desk, way out of reach. Hrm.

Cano looked at the box again, at its relative size proportional to her. The packaging was pretty slim. Rip one bit of the tape and the rest would probably go along with it. Maybe she could...

No. *No*, she thought.

But every second that passed made that option more realistic. Still, it was just... Ugh! She didn't want to do that. She didn't want to do that!

Cano looked at the box again, then sighed. Shook her head. Took a couple deep breaths, and closed her eyes. This was just like before, she told herself. She just had to visualize it. Picture the part of herself that she wanted to draw out of the wood; see it, draw it, sculpt it, and make it real. And in no time at all, she started feeling those telltale pins and needles that began in the back of her throat, making their way forward, inching closer to the surface.

First it was a dot. A single pinprick of electricity grabbing hold of her plant-like skin, tugging it back. Then it became a line, spreading out left and right as her entire face bristled with raw, restless energy. She could feel the thick, angular lump below her nose spring to life, its bottom half swaying from side to side as her jaw finally awoke from its slumber. The line blossomed with life and definition, color and shape bursting along its length until at last Cano let out a silent scream of victory.

She had a mouth!

Cano couldn't help but smile as she brushed her fingers over the new addition to her face. She could smile again! And take in big gulps of air all at once! And... not make a sound. That was probably a vocal chord thing, right? Those seemed tricky. She'd have to look them up.

She opened her mouth wide and clicked her teeth together, gingerly at first, and then with a little more gusto. She had teeth! And a... tongue?! Her body wriggled involuntarily as she probed the inside of her mouth. She'd forgotten about the whole making-a-tongue thing, but somehow whatever part of her creative process directed her shapeshifting had remembered to give her one. Good! Okay! The important part was that she had teeth; they lacked definition, to be certain, and who knows *what* they were made of, but they had what mattered: incisors in front, big mashy teeth along the sides, and most importantly...

Cano looked back at the cardboard container sitting next to her, steeling herself for the task to come. She gripped the box on either side of the tape, giving it a long look.

And bared her canines.

She really, really would've liked the ensuing scene to consist of one mighty bite where she'd clamp down and tear the box open a single fluid motion, but... the actual result was much less graceful. Thank goodness there was no one there to see her clawing at the box, chomping and biting and nibbling, making sour icky faces at the bitter taste as she gave the strip of adhesive tape a death of a thousand cuts. After an interminable battle, it was done. She was victorious. The box was open.

Cano wasted no time. She wanted to put the taste of glue and cardboard as far from her mind as possible. She pulled the flaps aside and dug into the container. Thankfully the battery's packaging was easily dealt with, and within moments she'd dragged the cable and the heavy slab of whatever-batteries-are-made-of out onto the cozy surface of the bean bag. Her fingers trembled as she plugged one end of the cable into the battery, the other into her phone, and turned it on.

And waited.

And... there it was. Charging. Just a little more time, and it'd have enough power to turn on. If all went well, the phone would have two, maybe three full cycles; more than enough for now. The biggest danger was alleviated, somewhat. Soon she could contact the world again.

She leaned back and let herself gently sway in place, allowing her trunk to bend and bear her weight as she relaxed. And no sooner did she let herself relax that all those little inexplicable aches and pains returned. She'd almost forgotten about them.

Cano was still dangerously dehydrated. And as she waited for her phone to charge up, her thoughts turned to how she could get some water before it was too late.

# Lights Out

The phone turning on again had been a welcome sight. What had *not* been so welcome was the seemingly never-ending torrent of notifications that scrolled across the screen as it finally found a signal. Goodness, Cano thought, it really had been two months. Everyone must have been so worried! Or frustrated? Oh no, what if they were angry with her unexplained silence? She checked the topics of the emails that flew by.

Well. 'Mildly concerned' seemed to be the consensus. Cano sighed. The colder season had begun, after all; this wouldn't be the first time she just up and vanished for weeks at a time. Maybe everyone just thought she was hiding under her blankets and watching shows while she half-heartedly worked on commissions. That did sound nice. And come to think of it, it was getting cold. Maybe she should just pull up her hoodie and warm up a bit, as comically oversized as it was now.

Cano put her frondy fist together and swiped across the screen, a more manageable task now that she'd grown a little since first tracking down her phone. First things first: solve the water problem. She dismissed the multiple pop-up reminders and reached over for the Lighthouse app. Maybe she could order some bottled water? Something easy to open.

She winced as she uncurled her fingers for a moment. She hadn't really been paying attention to it at the time, but just the act of working the screen had become more difficult. At first it had felt weird, then it turned into a soreness, and now it was almost painful... or at least the closest thing to pain she could experience right now. Being a tree was weird. Cano gave her leafy hands a wiggle and began to go through her usual exercise routine, just in case this was the same sort of familiar discomfort that could be eased this way. Maybe she should order a stylus too while she was at it. The smallest model.

She wasn't sure what she would have done if Renée hadn't been so helpful. She owed her a lot right now. How would things have turned out if she hadn't gotten that box right there, right then? Cano didn't want to think about it. She double-checked the order details, set the shipping time to urgent, and...

Hm. She'd already tempted fate once already. What if the water bottles were packaged separately? What if she didn't have the strength to open another box? Cano was already feeling weak after a little bit of time without water, there was no telling how long she could last—

Come to think of it, why was the power out? Would it just come back

on? That'd solve a lot of problems. May not even need the water if the humidifier came back on.

No, no, that was foolish! She'd grown so much since her first days as a tree. She'd only need more water going forward, and relying on a humidifier set to maximum sounded like a really bad plan. She needed every drop she could get.

Anyway! Power outage! Gosh, it was so hard to keep her mind on track right now. Cano switched over to her emails, just in case there had been a heads-up from the power company. Ah! There it was! Just a few days ago.

Subject: [HydroQT Updates] Work Delays

Hi again! Thanks for your patience as we work to resolve this situation. We want to apologize for the delay in overhauling the grid in your area and want to assure you that we're doing everything in our power to ensure you can return to your household within the next week. In the meantime, more amenity vouchers have been issued to all affected residents—

Wait, what? Delays? Next week? Return to your household?? What on earth was going on?! Cano frantically scrolled through the previous days and weeks of emails.

—in case you haven't relocated yet, please reply to this message or call the HydroQT helpline and we'll help arrange for your stay during this extended outage. We'll do our best to find you amenities that are close to home to ensure as little disruption to your day to day as—

Was she not supposed to even be here right now? Did all her neighbors just get relocated to local hotels or something? Was this for real? Cano kept scrolling back through message after message. That sort of thing usually meant losing power for a couple hours, not days. This sounded highly unusual.

—for bearing with us during these unusual circumstances. Rest assured the new equipment, once in place, won't require such drastic measures to repair or replace in the future. We're staying in close contact with the city council to ensure—

Cano shook her head, her shoulders drooping low. There it was: the very first email, delivered to her inbox... the day after her last stream.

—extensive work in your area, resulting in a

localized shutdown of the electrical grid for the entire duration. You have my personal assurance, along with that of the entire HydroQT team, that your needs will be taken care of during that time. We'll work with the city to find you furnished lodgings close to—

What rotten timing. If that message had gotten to her one day earlier, she wouldn't have set any of this up: the lamp, the bean bag, none of it. She'd be relaxing somewhere in a hotel room right now, instead of at home, completely alone, rooted to the floor, and desperately trying to make it through the day.

She sighed as loudly as a little sapling girl could.

Well. Maybe she was exaggerating a bit. This had happened two months ago, after all; would she really have delayed setting all this equipment up? Better to just reach out, get it done, and feel better afterwards, right? Hm. That's what made the most sense to her right now, but part of her couldn't help but think the Cano of a few weeks ago would've thought differently. Had she really changed that much?

She switched over to the camera app on her phone. Gosh. It was like seeing a completely different person, even without paying attention to the part-plant thing. But she didn't look strange, or alien; despite all the changes, she looked... familiar. Cano smiled despite herself. Maybe she'd grown a bit on the inside, too.

Or maybe it was just the fact that her body was vastly different now, on account of the whole being-a-tree thing. She didn't have a heart to beat a mile a minute, or a stomach to have butterflies in, or any number of small biological factors that are so easy to overlook when you're affected by them. Wasn't that something Janice kept telling her? Your body's always working, sometimes in ways that affect you in ways you're not prepared for. She kept forgetting that, somehow.

Cano looked at her messages. Speaking of Janice... No, it was the middle of the night, wasn't it? She quickly looked up at the time to confirm. Yeah. She'd still be asleep. Gosh, what was she going to say, though? How do you just come back after two months of radio silence and explain that you're a plant girl?

Wait. Cano shook her head. She was getting sidetracked again! Ugh! What had she been looking up her messages for in the first place... oh, right! Her Lighthouse order! Power outage confirmed. She couldn't count on the power returning anytime soon. She needed water. Bam! Bottles, a stylus, everything. She was ready to confirm the order when she saw the message field. Right. That had been the other thing on her mind.

She couldn't risk the bottles being impossible to open. Her little

teeth had done an okay job getting through shipping tape, but that sort of heavy-duty plastic wasn't going to go down without a bigger fight than she could muster at the moment. She needed help. And while she briefly toyed with the idea of asking Vernon, Cano decided to leave that possibility as the absolute last-ditch, worst-case scenario. No, first, she'd ask Renée.

please deliver inside interior door and

Cano paused mid-message. Could she really ask for that? It was going too far, right? Renée was a postal worker, she wasn't a friend. ... Was she? The two of them had always gotten along. She'd obviously followed the last message; she'd set foot inside her apartment. Maybe this would be okay. She'd make it up to her, somehow.

please deliver inside interior door & water the plant

There. Would that do it? Ugh, what a weird request! Who would ask for that? Why not just do it yourself, she'd wonder? Could Cano even face Renée after that? She had to make it clear she had no choice. Make herself seem like less of a weirdo.

please deliver inside interior door & water the plant  
(I can't at the moment)

No, that wasn't enough. It could still be read like some sort of demand. That wasn't right! That's not how you ask a favor of the person who brings you the one bit of human contact that regularly makes you happy. That kind of tone could drive a wedge between them. And more than anything else, Cano wanted to avoid that.

please deliver inside interior door & water the plant  
(I can't at the moment, I'm so sorry)

Maybe? Now it felt too pathetic. It already felt like she was asking so much, even if it was a life-or-death thing for her. But how could Renée know that? Cano couldn't just tell her about her plant person situation. Not on a packing slip that anyone could see. Oh right, anyone could see this! She couldn't just tell the world she wasn't home! Scratch that whole second line. Find an alternative. Something not quite as apologetic, but still heartfelt. Something like...

please deliver inside interior door & water the plant  
(I will make it up to you! thank you!!)

Okay she had to stop adding more to this and just hit the order button already.

Bam.

Cano closed the Lighthouse app and let out a huge sigh, staring into

the darkness for a bit. Her usual method of processing big decisions. Breathe in, breathe out, and let the stress slowly fade away. Except in this case, there wasn't much stress to begin with, nor did her body (or mind? or both?) have the means to stockpile it as efficiently. As a result, it took just a few seconds to get the moment of clarity she usually had to chase for a good hour or two.

And it left a sour taste in her mouth.

Gosh, she'd forgotten how crummy it felt to fall down the rabbit hole of anxious ruminations. She hated this! She didn't want to think and rethink and overthink every decision. She didn't want to let her life be dictated by the anticipation and outmaneuvering of every worst-case scenario. More than anything, Cano wanted to be free from this constant obstacle standing in the way of just living her life. She wanted to finally move on from this holding pattern. She wanted to grow.

Cano looked over to her message notifications. It was time for the next big hurdle: reaching out. She raised a leafy hand and... turned the screen off. Not right now. That whole episode had taken a lot out of her. First, she needed to rest a bit. Tomorrow. Tomorrow for sure, she'd check in with her friends.



# Harmony

The sunlight filtered through the swaying curtain, leaving slivers of golden warmth for motes of dust to dance in. The sapling smiled. She loved brisk and breezy summer days the most. All the uplifting benefits of a sunny day, none of the heat or humidity. Any other time of year, this cold would've been a bit uncomfortable. Not today. Today, it was perfect.

She let herself be carried by the occasional gust of wind, lazily bending to its slightest push, reveling in the momentary lightheadedness of a new position. Sometimes she would lean toward the window, and drink in the view of the rooftops dotted with trees. Sometimes she would lean back toward the living room, watching as shadows danced across the multicolored sea of upholstery. Everything was happening too fast; everything was happening in slow-motion. And from her vantage point in the earthen pot up on the windowsill, she got to experience every moment of it. It was pure bliss.

The sapling was gently eased out of her reverie by a hearty breeze of cool air and dulcet tones. She smiled as the notes washed over her, wrapping her up in a blanket of song. This was her favorite time of day.

A silhouette emerged from the shadows in the far reaches of the room, approaching with a step as steady as the beat of her melody. She got closer and closer, shaking the earth in rhythmic waves that rippled through the sapling's very being. And then, she stopped. And observed. Once an eternity or two had passed, she bent all the way down until her face was level with the earthen pot by the window.

"Ah, there you are," the Lady said.

The sapling basked in silent appreciation.

"Oh, look at you! Let's see about getting you something to drink," the Lady added, reaching into the rustling depths. Crackling and rippling sounds of unseen conjuration filled the air, rising into a crescendo as the Lady produced a crystal-clear pitcher of water.

The sapling girl wiggled imperceptibly in anticipation.

"Hopefully this is enough to keep you satisfied for a little while," the Lady said with a light chuckle as she gently tipped the instrument over, tracing artful circles around and around.

The dancing cascades of water soaked deep into the soil, filling the sapling with sated relief. A veritable well of energy opened up at her roots, from which her entire body drank its fill. She'd almost forgotten how good it felt to have life flowing through every fibre of her being. Hopefully next time would come sooner. Oh, how she loved it when the Lady visited.



“Take care, baby girl.”

Each word lifted her up higher and higher into the sky, setting her consciousness adrift among the clouds. By the time the little sapling’s attention returned to the world around her, she was alone again. Had a moment just passed? Or an eon? It was so difficult to tell. She lazily swayed around her axis, looking out into the darkness where the Lady had reunited with the blurry horizon. Only still shadows, with nary a song to give her. Ah well.

The melodies would return, and the Lady with them. A match made in heaven.

But for now, her roots wriggling merrily, the sapling contented herself with the earth.

# A Crack in the Curtains

Cano opened her eyes lazily, taking in her surroundings. Ah, right. She was a tree.

Still, she'd awoken more rested than she'd felt in a very long time. In fact, that was the best night's sleep she'd had in recent memory, even before turning into a plant person.

Her human traits rose from the wood and the leaves once more, having gone dormant while she slept. As always, it sent lightning coursing through her body, but thankfully every subsequent time was less intense than the first had been. She opened her mouth wide, testing the limits of her jaw. That part of her tingled far longer than the rest, possibly because it was still young.

What would that mean for the next part of her she made more human than plant, she wondered? Well, she'd already done the eyes and the face; whatever the next thing was, it couldn't be as intense as that. Though, what else could she need at this point?

Aside from height, she thought, as her eyes drifted upward toward her desk. Her drawing tablet was still out of reach, taunting her from above as she helplessly swatted at the space under it. All she needed was to get close enough to pull it down to her level and she'd be able to draw again.

The tree girl chuckled silently. Of course that was the first thing on her mind: getting back to making art. Not becoming human again, not getting help, just... working on those commissions, and maybe picking up one of her projects in various stages of preparation. Even as a tree, she'd be able to do all that. The rest was details. All she needed was to be able to hold a stylus.

Then she remembered. The stylus! She'd ordered one for her phone; when would it get here? It'd take a few days, certainly, so she'd have to hold out until then...

The layers upon layers of what she'd been up to the past few days came crashing down one after the other. Right! The water! She was dehydrated! She needed to stay safe, conserve energy, and—on a whim, she turned to the side, just in case.

There was another box. Opened, this time. With a half-empty bottle of water next to it.

She looked down. The soil around her roots was still moist. Renée had come! She'd read the note! Oh, thank goodness. Cano was safe. She was hydrated. No wonder she'd felt so well-rested; it all made sense now. The delivery lady had come through! And left a tiny crack in the

curtains, just enough to let a beam of sunlight through.

Cano paused. Somewhere in the back of her mind was a strangely familiar feeling, a sense of déjà vu tickling at her memory. But the more she tried to remember, the further away it fled, like a half-forgotten dream. Which made sense, considering she'd slept for multiple days again. Idly, she wondered how many times she'd dreamt.

Ah well. At least now she was out of the woods, so to speak. She had water, and... a stylus! Somewhere in that box! She could use her phone again without hurting her fingers too much! She reached over in a fit of excitement and pulled the box closer, tugging at the other bottles within until her frond-like fingers landed on what she was searching for. Triumphantly, she pulled out the little capacitive stylus. Made for phones, but most importantly: made for tiny hands.

Cano reached over to her phone, only to find that it had shrunk again. Gosh, she just kept on growing, didn't she? A good thing, she figured; better to grow back to the size of a person again, rather than stay this small forever. Doomed to spend her time in a pot, up on a shelf, or maybe even on someone's windowsill.

Well. That one didn't sound too bad, actually. The mental image felt kind of nice. And somehow... familiar? There it was again, that uncanny feeling pulling at the corners of her mind. Cano tried to latch onto it, to no avail.

Ah well. Better focus on the task at hand.

She turned back to her phone and clicked it on. Still more notifications, well past the maximum; the number had stopped growing at this point. Unlike her, she thought to herself with a silent chuckle.

Cano took a deep breath. She'd been sort of dreading this moment: saying hi again after being offline for so long. She had just up and vanished for two months with no explanation. Even for a winter hermit like her, that was pushing it. Her friends must be so worried. Or worse, angry. She really hoped that wasn't the case. But either way, once she explained everything, they'd understand, right?

Part of her was still scared of telling them about the whole plant girl thing. But while the worries about her safety were justified, these were her online friends! She could trust them. And even if she couldn't, well, they didn't know where she lived, did they?

Unlike her parents. The less they knew about her current predicament, Cano reasoned, the better.

So. Time to tell someone. But who? That was the question, wasn't it? She couldn't just dump the news in group chat. Better to tell someone privately first—someone who would believe her—and go from there.

Better to tell Nell.

Cano opened up the group chat app and scrolled over to Nell's username—greyed out, to her dismay. It was morning, somehow, which

meant that either she'd gone offline to work or she was still asleep. No go.

Who else, then? Vern? Ahaha, no. Absolutely not.

Double? Hm. Cano knew she could trust Double, no matter what. They weren't that close personally, but they'd been making art streams together for years now, and that went a long way. They weren't the best at communication, but they understood one another. Maybe that—

**Strawberryjan:** OMG CANO'S ONLINE

Cano froze like a deer in the headlights. Oh. *Right*. Opening the app had updated her status. Of course Janice had seen her icon go green. She was probably working on her next comic strip right now, staring at the screen. Occasionally typing in group chat. Keeping an eye out, like she always did.

**vern\_notice:** wait what

**NellDotWham:** morning everyone

**NellDotWham:** uhh

**NellDotWham:** omg for real??

What was Cano going to do? She scrambled for the stylus. What to say, how to say it, there were so many words and so little time! She was nowhere near ready! Would everyone be friendly? Or worried, or distant, or angry? It was always so hard to decipher emotions over text! Cano raised the stylus to the screen, hands shaking as she brought up the keyboard for her reply.

**Cano\_Pics:** hi

Cano couldn't write anything more. Where to begin? Apologize for the lengthy absence? Explain right away?

**vern\_notice:** dude! been a while

**vern\_notice:** anyway I was thinking I'd redo the whole overlay

**NellDotWham:** cano!!

**Double:** (°O°)

**Strawberryjan:** You were gone for so long!

Was that anger or relief? When did Janice use exclamation marks again? Cano moved the stylus from letter to letter, unsure where to start with her reply. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know *how* to say it. A jumble of words clashed together in her head as she struggled to put together a coherent message.

**Strawberryjan:** When I said we should all take a break until the next DLC I didn't mean it literally. :)

Cano stared at the screen. Smiley face. Janice wasn't angry. Okay. Okay! That narrowed the field of possible responses a lot. But there were still so many ways for this to go!

**NellDotWham:** glad you came back!

**NellDotWham:** we were getting a little worried

**Double:** Last week you asked us to look up emergency services.

**NellDotWham:** we were getting a lot worried

**Cano\_Pics:** omg

**Cano\_Pics:** im sorry

Cano cursed her carelessness as she tapped out bite-size replies. She was stalling for time, absolutely unprepared to discuss this. But now she didn't really have a choice.

**NellDotWham:** <3

**Strawberryjan:** That's just Cano going hermit mode.

**Double:** Welcome back.

**Strawberryjan:** How are you doing? Cold weather treating you okay?

Her eyes went wide. Winter depression. Janice thought Cano had been taking time off because of her seasonal sadness! Cano's hands moved of their own volition, tapping and dragging the stylus across the screen.

**Cano\_Pics:** im doing okay

She typed furiously, as fast as her little limbs would allow, not even pausing to think about what she was replying. She saw an escape route and instinctively threw herself into it.

**Cano\_Pics:** been taking a break from everything

**Cano\_Pics:** sorry for the long afk

There. Janice had given her a way out. She wouldn't have to find the words, or figure out how to tell everyone right then and there. She could have more time.

**Strawberryjan:** Aw, sorry to hear that. Hope you're feeling better, kiddo.

**NellDotWham:** Yeah! We're here for you. <3

Cano let out the breath she had been holding unconsciously. What a relief. Her friends weren't angry. She could take her time and brainstorm a proper way to tell them the news. Maybe one by one, like she'd planned. Start with Nell, and then probably Janice or Double...

Hm. Maybe Double first. It wouldn't be long before they asked Cano

for an art stream, and there was no way to make that happen right now, not until she got bigger. She'd have to find a way to stall. Blame technology, maybe; that wasn't too far from the truth. But then Nell would offer to help. No, there ought to be an alternative. Maybe say she just wasn't up to it? *I'm so sorry, I can't bring myself to draw right now*, or some variation on that. Something not quite as apologetic, but still heartfelt. Something like—

Wait.

*Wait.* No, no, she was doing it again!

Cano snapped out of her attempt at anxious clairvoyance, shaking the cobwebs from her mind. Dang it. It was like second nature: she found a safe path and dove into it headfirst, no matter how uncomfortable it was. Hadn't she just gone over this? This wasn't how she wanted to live her life anymore! She didn't want to spend another minute in this frame of mind, questioning every interaction, coming up with layer upon layer of excuses for the sake of keeping her holding pattern. She wanted to be free. She wanted to grow beyond this!

She picked up the stylus and jabbed at her phone's keyboard, typing out the words before she could think better of it.

**Cano\_Pics:** actually

**Cano\_Pics:** i gotta tell the truth

**Strawberryjan:** What's up?

**Cano\_Pics:** something weird happened and

She gritted her teeth, tapping out the letters as so many parts of her loudly protested in a hurricane of doubt and worry. Her mind was no stranger to storms like this. The old Cano would have surely broken. The new Cano would only bend.

**Cano\_Pics:** im a plant girl

Bam.

She tapped enter, dropping the stylus to the ground. There was no going back now; this wasn't who Cano was anymore. She would keep dragging herself forward kicking and screaming if she had to.

**vern\_notice:** what

**Double:** Cool.

**NellDotWham:** omg congrats!! <3

Cano blinked. They... they were taking this awfully well. Huh. Wow, she expected them to be nice about it, but this was a welcome surprise. Maybe she really had been worried over nothing.

**Strawberryjan:** Aw, that's great! I always figured you'd be more of a turtle though.



**NellDotWham:** right?? or a cat! big snoozing in a sunbeam energy  
**Double:** Hermit crab.

Cano shook her head. No, she didn't mean... Oh for goodness's sake! *Don't give me another way out*, she thought to herself as she picked the stylus back up. When she said there was no going back, she meant it!

**NellDotWham:** omg for real I'm so happy for you!  
**Cano\_Pics:** no i mean  
**Cano\_Pics:** literally  
**vern\_notice:** what  
**Double:** ?  
**Strawberryjan:** I don't think that's the right word, kiddo.

Cano sighed as loudly as a sapling girl without a voice could. This would take so many words. How could she make them understand? Her gaze drifted to the icons on the side of her phone's keyboard. Well. She could just show them. Yeah. In for a penny, right? She lifted the stylus up and hit the camera button. Record video, selfie cam. Lean forward into awkward wave. Sheepish smile, hold for a sec. Stop, send, and hope for the best.

Cano watched as the group chat filled up with "typing..." action icons.

**vern\_notice:** dude is that a live2be avatar holy crap  
**vern\_notice:** it looks SICK how do I get one??  
**NellDotWham:** uhhhhhhhhh  
**Strawberryjan:** I didn't know you did 3D! That's like out of a movie!

Cano grumbled silently as she started up the camera again. She reached down and tried to lift up the phone as best she could, tilting it down to give a better view of the rest of her body to show that she wasn't just a rigged hand puppet for a chat program. But as she put the phone back down into the spot she'd made for it, she misjudged the placement slightly and sent it falling backwards onto the bean bag, sliding away from her. She barely managed to catch it in time, spending a few careful moments returning it to its spot in front of her. All the while with the camera running, too; she shrugged and ended it there, sending the whole thing over. At least her embarrassment would be additional proof.

Once again, several people were typing.

**NellDotWham:** cano??  
**vern\_notice:** what  
**Strawberryjan:** wjat???

**Double:** Literally.

She sighed with some amount of relief. That had been way harder than it needed to be, but it was done. The biggest hurdle was behind her. The rest was just chatting.

**Cano\_Pics:** yeah

**Cano\_Pics:** haha

**Cano\_Pics:** i have a humidifier

**Strawberryjan:** Don't plants need more water though?

Are you sure you're okay?

**Cano\_Pics:** yeah im fine

**Cano\_Pics:** I had water delivered

**NellDotWham:** like inside your apartment?

**Cano\_Pics:** yeah

**Cano\_Pics:** delivery lady has the code

**NellDotWham:** oh my gosh your oddball lobby thing

**Double:** Did you get this apartment specifically to  
make it easier in case you turned into a plant?

**Cano\_Pics:** no!!!

**Strawberryjan:** I can't believe we're already making  
jokes about this.

**NellDotWham:** I appreciate the humor tbh, helps with  
not freaking out

**Cano\_Pics:** just lucky i guess haha

**vern\_notice:** you're lucky you're still getting mail

**vern\_notice:** it's been super hard to get around over  
here, they've been tearing up the streets outside

**Double:** Like always.

**vern\_notice:** like more than usual

**vern\_notice:** it's a power grid thing, a whole chunk  
of the neighborhood lost power for like a week

**NellDotWham:** oh dang

**Strawberryjan:** Is that your part of town where you  
live, Cano?

**vern\_notice:** people there lucked out tho, city put  
everyone up in hotels or something

**vern\_notice:** all we got was an overnight blackout,  
it's not fair

**Double:** It's not fair that you could stay home?

**vern\_notice:** FREE HOTEL ROOM!!

**vern\_notice:** WITH A POOL!!

**vern\_notice:** ALL YOU CAN EAT BREAKFAST!!!

**vern\_notice:** people paid to be nice to you! it RULES!

# Like a Drum

*BZZZZZZT!*

The dull thump of the front door closing reverberated up the walls and along the floor. Smaller impacts followed, rhythmically making their way up the stairs. One second of trepidation, maybe two, then the pitter-patter of fingers on the keypad heralded the opening of the apartment door and the accompanying gush of wind.

Renée stepped into the apartment, humming to herself like she always did when it was just the two of them: her, and the little plant she cared for.

Cano dared not even peek, out of fear of being discovered as more than just a tree. So that's what she remained, whenever there was company.

"Good morning," she said as she placed another box on the floor, after a moment's careful hesitation—possibly to avoid displacing the others already there. "Starting to get crowded here, huh?" There was the sound of fingers brushing against plastic as another water bottle was lifted from the open package.

"Looks like you're doing better," Renée said as she twisted the cap open. "Good. Your absentee roommate's lucky I've got a green thumb." She bent down to pour a bit of water inside the torn-open bean bag around the growing sapling. "And a sunny disposition," she added with a smile in her voice.

Cano's leaves imperceptibly fluttered as the air carried Renée's voice to them. She was so close now.

The postal worker shifted around, her hand retrieving something small and hollow from a back pocket. She fiddled with the water bottle in her hand—half empty still, judging from the tiny waves within—and held it close.

*Pshht! Pshht!*

A delicate mist descended onto Cano, coating her fronds in a soothing cloak of moisture. So caught up was she in this newfound sensation that she barely noticed Renée adjusting the assorted heap of fabric around her roots.

"What a weird planter," Renée said as she stood back up. The sound of fingers against fabric, followed by some beeping and booping, told Cano that the postal worker was checking the device at her hip. "Alright baby girl, duty calls. One more big push before the break. Take care!"

The air in the living room shifted as the postal worker closed the door, flinging tiny motes of dust into the air in a little dance. Before

Cano could fully appreciate the down-to-earth beauty of that moment, her world was set alight.

She clutched her chest as her whole body was wracked with an intense burst of electricity, the very core of her being set alight by a sudden rush of life and... emotion?

A solid nugget of heat materialized somewhere deep inside, sending shockwaves up her branches and all the way down to her roots. It was as if every feeling she'd ever felt came barreling through the door at once, overwhelming each of her senses. All she could do was weather the storm coming from inside of her, trembling as the pulses slowly ebbed in intensity and slowed in frequency.

But they didn't stop.

Even after she'd calmed down, Cano could still feel the gentle rhythmic thump inside her chest. This was the first time she'd grown something new without conscious thought. What had brought this on? What did it mean? All she'd done was stand quietly while Renée dropped by and spoke—

And back it was, slightly louder and a tiny bit stronger, like the beat of a drum. *Oh my gosh*, Cano thought. She had a heart again.

But why? She didn't need one, per se. At least, she'd been doing fine without one. Was it just... decorative? A little reminder of the human under the layers of animated bark and wood? She took a deep breath and held it, focusing her attention within. Calming herself, whispering a silent lullaby to her new addition. And just like that, the heartbeats slowed, grew quiet, and became still.

Huh. What a strange state her body had grown into: a cozy halfway point between plant and animal. If she didn't need it to live, what had caused her to grow a heart? And why now, all of a sudden? Was it just because Ren—

*Click!*

Cano was jolted out of her contemplation by a cacophony of sights and sounds. A blinding light, a brief tremor, a half-dozen digital chimes and chirps all wrapped up in the return of a background hum that felt as familiar as its absence had been retroactively uncanny. The sun lamp had turned back on, as had the heating and a litany of electronics still plugged in around the living room.

The power was back!

Her eyes darted over to her computer, still dormant under the desk. It was really a crapshoot: some devices would turn themselves back on after an outage, and some wouldn't. Just her luck. She wasn't exactly sure how she would even hit the power switch once she had grown back to person-size, given the awkward spot it was in.

Cano shifted her gaze to her drawing tablet, still hanging on its shiny new (well, admittedly a little dusty by now) ergonomic arm. She'd

been growing over the past few days, but not enough to get within arm's reach of it. If she could just get it down—and turn her PC back on—she'd be able to draw again. Which, to be frank, she missed terribly at this point.

She sighed voicelessly, looking at all her inaccessible devices. It was a multi-part problem. One that would benefit from multiple points of view.

Cano reached for her phone and opened up the group chat, hoping some of her friends would be up by now. They'd been chatting a bit every day since the big reveal, and that had helped her mood immensely. She'd have liked to be more online, but since her phone had a finite number of refills from the charger she'd gotten, she figured it'd be best to ration it for the time being.

Though, if she was being honest, the main reason was that she didn't want to tell them *too* much, not quite yet. She had been cagey about the power situation, given its association with her physical location. She didn't think she had anything to fear from them, of course, but old habits die hard. Her address was one thing she guarded fiercely, especially while she was feeling vulnerable.

(She already had multiple contingency plans ready to go if she needed immediate physical help but, as they all involved Vernon stomping into her apartment, not a single one of them had any appeal whatsoever.)

Now that power was back on, she could bring up a few problems and not have to come up with excuses on the fly as to why proposed solutions wouldn't work. And she was eager to workshop with her friends again, even if it was about rather mundane things.

**Cano\_Pics:** morning

**Double:** (▽▽)ノ

**Strawberryjan:** Hey kiddo! How are you holding up?

**Cano\_Pics:** doing ok

**Double:** Hm.

**Double:** Something you ate the day before.

Cano blinked at Double's response, then nodded. Right. Her and her friends had gone back to chatting daily like always, except that sooner or later every conversation would swing back around to playing detective with the cause of Cano's transformation. They'd ruled out curses and errant wishes for the most part, as well as some sort of hereditary mutation. Could that big meal Cano had had the night this all started be related? It felt like a lifetime ago. But that dinner was nothing out of the ordinary; she'd had it many times before, even.

**Cano\_Pics:** nah i ate that before

**Cano\_Pics:** still kinda full too

**Strawberryjan:** Wait, have you eaten anything since?  
**Cano\_Pics:** nah  
**Strawberryjan:** That's a long time without food!  
Aren't you hungry?

Cano looked down at where her stomach would be. She hadn't really thought about it. What would she be hungry for? She'd like to eat, sure, because food was tasty and all, but... nothing in her body gave her a particular need for it at the moment.

**Cano\_Pics:** not really  
**Double:** So photosynthesis is enough. Interesting.  
**Strawberryjan:** That sun lamp is really doing the work, huh.

Cano looked up at the source of her daily light. She hadn't really given it a second thought, but of all the things she introduced to her apartment right before everything went weird, it was the most suspicious one. Strange instructions, dubious credentials... Hadn't it gotten rave reviews, though? It had to be good for something, then. That many Lighthouse users wouldn't rate a dangerous product that high. Hm.

**vern\_notice:** sup  
**Cano\_Pics:** hi  
**vern\_notice:** new content dropping after the holidays!! you guys wanna run some instances to stock up? the verninators keep asking when I'm gonna do another owo stream!  
**Double:** Maybe after I clear my commissions.  
**Strawberryjan:** Oh yeah we've been meaning to do another art stream, we should set that up.

Cano stared at her phone and sighed. Right; she couldn't escape her current predicament forever, as fun as this conversation was. She was still marooned on a bright orange bean bag island, without the tools that felt like home to her.

**Cano\_Pics:** i wish i could draw again  
**Strawberryjan:** Oh kiddo...  
**Strawberryjan:** Can you not draw now? What would you need for that?  
**Cano\_Pics:** cant turn on my pc  
**Cano\_Pics:** or reach my tablet  
**Cano\_Pics:** i need to grow some more :\  
**Strawberryjan:** Oh.  
**Strawberryjan:** How quickly have you been, uh  
**Cano\_Pics:** hard to say

**Double:** Fertilizer might help.

**Cano\_Pics:** ewww

The sapling girl made an icky-face expression. She didn't want to think about the nature of that suggestion, nor how exactly she'd go about getting some delivered and mixed into whatever her roots were dug into. But, well, if it helped her get back to drawing faster..

**Strawberryjan:** Ooh you should have someone talk to you!

**Strawberryjan:** I talk to my plants all the time, it helps them grow faster.

**Double:** Sounds like an urban legend.

**Strawberryjan:** No, that one show did an experiment! It actually works!

**Cano\_Pics:** huh

**Strawberryjan:** Cano, you should join our next stream. Just to chat! We'll talk at you all you want, how's that sound?

Cano looked up at her art tablet, taunting her from above. It had been so long since she'd heard her friends speak. And she could do it with just her phone. Whether or not it actually affected her growth, the thought of familiar voices talking, their sound waves reverberating around the room, gently bouncing off her every branch... Despite herself, her mind returned to earlier that morning. She remembered Renée's sing-song voice washing over her.

Deep inside her chest, Cano's heart started beating again.

**Cano\_Pics:** that sounds really nice



# Barking Up the Wrong Me

**Double:** Starting up the stream.

**NellDotWham:** hey can I join the call? it's been a while since I caught one of these

**Strawberryjan:** Sure hon!

Cano stared at the notifications as they popped up at the top of her phone, looking back down to the voice chat app. The call was happening, and she wanted to be part of it—even if just to listen. But that meant doing the unthinkable.

Remembering her password.

She looked at her dormant PC once again, cursing the distance between them. If only she'd written it down somewhere, or added it to her keychain. But no, she always told herself, she can just do that later! Well, a big help that was right now. Hmph.

Cano gave the login screen a withering glare as she tried yet another variation.

Username: Cano\_Pics

Password: \*\*\*\*\*

[x] Login [ ] Register

*Wrong password or account does not exist. Please try again.*

Ugh! The sapling girl gave the phone her best grumpy face. Maybe she should give up and make a new account for now. If it was just for this call, it wouldn't be too much effort to set up. What to name it, though? She hit backspace a few times, trying to come up with an alt.

Username: Cano\_Pic

Username: Cano\_Pi

Username: Cano\_P

...Wait.

She grinned despite herself. That was kinda cute. Had a really nice ring to it. And it was already close to a name she still felt alright about, for the most part. Yeah. Yeah! She looked up at the thick cluster of leaves that had replaced her hair, feeling their layers shift and sway at the craning of her neck. Canopy, like part of a tree. Like part of her.

She rolled the name around in her head for a few moments as her smile got bigger and bigger. Yeah. That felt just right.

Canopy hit the Register button and quickly tapped her way through

the steps between her and the call with her friends.

"Nah, you know I'm not into that," Vernon said with a chuckle. "But I dunno, I guess you could draw me as something cool if you wanted, like a red wolf. It'd be funny!"

"A *canis lupus rufus*?" Double asked, tapping away at their keyboard. "Hm. It does have a little bit of red on the ears."

"No, like, the one that's like, all orange-red, with the black paws like a fox," Vernon replied. "It, uh, it was in a meme," he quickly added.

More keyboard sounds from Double. "Oh, the maned wolf. *Chrysocyon*, the golden dog."

"What's up?" Nell said.

"Uh. No," Double replied, "not you. For Vernon. Technically a wolf. Solitary. Very loud."

"Oh, sorry!" Nell laughed. "That totally fits him, though. Oh, hey Cano!"

Canopy had no voice with which to reply, but was happy to be included. She typed a quick 'hi' in the group chat and gently propped the phone up so she could just hang back, watch her friends' shared screens, and listen.

"Yeah, kiddo's back!" Janice said.

Canopy assumed her old mentor was addressing the public stream chat. She'd have logged in herself, but that would require remembering another password and she just didn't have the spoons to go through another account setup process.

"Yup, they're doing fine," Janice added. "Just the winter doldrums. They'll stream when they're good and ready, don't you worry about it."

The sapling girl rolled those words around in her head for a moment. Yeah. While that way of referring to herself had felt right in the past, it didn't anymore. She leaned forward again and picked up her stylus, switching back to the private group chat.

**Cano\_P:** so uh

**Cano\_P:** I like \_she\_ now

Canopy quickly dismissed the group chat app, as if no longer seeing the words she'd just sent out into the world would somehow shield her from their effect.

There was another pause. Then, furious keyboards in unison.

**Strawberryjan:** Oh! I understand kiddo, sorry about that!

**Double:** d(◊◊)b

**NellDotWham:** thx, good to know <3

**NellDotWham:** omg CANOPY

**NellDotWham:** I just got that!! it's so cute! <3

**vern\_notice:** ohhhhh

**vern\_notice:** wait I don't get it  
\* Double has shared a link.  
**vern\_notice:** what's this

Canopy held a hand up to her face, one eye peeking through the fronds at the notifications flying across the top of her phone's display. Her heart had woken up again, and it was beating so fast.

"...Outer layer of leaves on a tree—ohh, I get it now," Vernon said. "Uh, anyway, you know that new OwO content that's dropping after the holidays? Welllll, your good buddy Vern got early access again, courtesy of Team Ourobros! Who wants to be part of the big reveal stream one week before the update goes live?"

"Oh heck yeah," Nell said. "I kinda miss that place."

"It really grows on you, doesn't it?" Janice chuckled. "Online games. That's how they get you!"

Double made a sound of general agreement as they switched to a blank canvas and started on their second commission of the night.

Canopy wanted to say she was up for it too, she really did. But it wasn't very realistic, was it? She was still so small; her desk still looming above her. Still... That was what, around a month away? Maybe she could grow tall enough by then. She could work at it. Get her PC working, figure out how to work things with her leafy fingers... Yeah. Maybe she'd be ready to stream again.

Maybe next year, she thought to herself with a silent chuckle. Except this time, the new year was right around the corner.

First things first though, she'd need a voice. Canopy did her best approximation of cracking her knuckles and nodded to herself. No time like the present. She knew the process by now: deep breaths, eyes closed, and a clear mental picture of what part of her to grow anew. This was a vocal cord thing, right? She already had a mouth, she could breathe, so all she had to do was add a little bit in-between to make sounds with.

Nevermind what that actually looked like in practice. She could just play it by ear.

Canopy inhaled, then exhaled; inhaled again, then exhaled once more. She went through the motions over and over, visualizing the spot in her throat that would become a vocal instrument. Kinda like a blade of grass held between two thumbs, to use a suitable plant metaphor. She smirked, and kept at it.

And soon enough there came that telltale tingling deep inside, like a bolt of lightning born inside her lungs, caught in a holding pattern in her throat. Canopy couldn't help but smile, trying to flex those nascent muscles and turn her breath into sound. She strained invisible cords, willing them into existence with electricity coursing through her body as

every gasp of air exiting her lungs eagerly struggled to be heard.

And then she heard it.

A sudden burst of noise punctuating the silence, then another, and another, all coming together to form a high-pitched hum that gained in volume. Awkward at first, then more and more uniform as Canopy found her footing—and her voice.

"I'm here!" she said with a wide smile.

Then there was silence. Or rather, a pause.

"...kiddo?" Janice asked.

"Hi," Canopy said, unable to stop grinning. "I'm here. Count me in."

"Whoa, is that a new voice mod?" Vernon asked.

"Heheh, kinda," Canopy replied, suddenly conscious of just how different she sounded now. She didn't hate her voice! She didn't hate her voice? It was possible to not hate your voice?? She hadn't noticed her heart start beating again, but now it was racing.

**NellDotWham:** omg you can talk?? is that your voice?

**Cano\_P:** yeah

**Cano\_P:** i grew one

**Double:** Σ( ° ° )

**NellDotWham:** asdkfljasf

"Well alright!" Vernon said, "then it's a full party!"

Saying she was in was all well and good, but Canopy was still painfully short of the distance between herself and her art tablet. She had a lot of growing to do in a short time. But something inside told her it wasn't impossible. Hard, yes. Intimidating, for sure. But with enough dedication, she'd be streaming again. And now she didn't need a voice modulator to feel comfortable! She could just talk naturally. Maybe even... turn on her webcam? No, she said to herself as she shook her head vigorously; that'd be too much. Right?

"You heard it here first guys," Vernon said, "the dream team's gonna be back together for that *OwO* premiere! Add that date to your calendar 'cause after the new year, we'll show you something no one's ever seen before!"

"Yeah, haha," Canopy added quietly.

She was about to lean back and return to relaxing in the company of her friends when her phone's screen dimmed all of a sudden. Canopy briefly blinked in confusion. Wait, was the battery running low again? But the power had come back, why—

Then it dawned on her.

The phone was plugged in, yes... but still into the battery pack she had delivered. And that was running out, especially after calling and streaming video. How could she have made such a ridiculous oversight?! *Of course* her phone still had limited charge. Why hadn't she paid

attention? Gosh, she felt so foolish.

Well. At least she had more than a few minutes this time, given the low battery warning's generous advance notice. Canopy gave a quick glance at her PC on the odd chance that all the connection ports *weren't* out of reach at the very top of the computer tower, to no avail. She grumbled at her clumsy oversight and quickly ordered a new battery. Better get some more water, too; the air was awfully dry with the humidifier still turned off and she was running low.

She sighed, audibly for the first time, and decided to call it a night earlier than she'd planned. Better not to push her luck.

**NellDotWham:** so you just, like... think about it?  
**vern\_notice:** and grow a new whatever  
**Cano\_P:** yeah pretty much  
**Cano\_P:** its a lot the first time  
**Cano\_P:** its easier when it comes back  
**Strawberryjan:** What do you mean it comes back?  
**Cano\_P:** when i wake up it comes back  
**NellDotWham:** wait  
**Double:** You're a tree when you sleep?  
**Cano\_P:** yeah  
**Cano\_P:** i think so  
**vern\_notice:** wait wait so you just like, go treemode  
          whenever you want?  
**NellDotWham:** "eff this, I'm gonna be a tree for a bit"  
**Double:** Powerful.  
**Cano\_P:** yeah haha  
**Cano\_P:** ok i should log off  
**NellDotWham:** never  
**NellDotWham:** jk please take care <3  
**Strawberryjan:** Oh no, phone troubles again?  
**Cano\_P:** yeah batterys almost dead  
**vern\_notice:** you should really plug your phone in  
**Cano\_P:** cant reach pc  
**Cano\_P:** need to grow more  
**Double:** (o^ω^)"(ノ\_<)  
**Cano\_P:** anyway new battery should be here soon  
**Cano\_P:** ok bye

# In Knots

Canopy awoke in a stupor, her body resisting her attempts to grow back the human additions she'd made to her form. Shifting back into her newly familiar shape took more effort this time, and once she was done, the little bursts of electricity coursing through her limbs overstayed their welcome. Aches and discomfort were left in their wake. It had been a while since she'd felt this awful.

As she did every morning now, she looked up at the art tablet dangling above her and extended an arm toward it. Nope. Still out of her reach. She sighed. Growing was so unpredictable! One day she was doing fine and the next day she saw no progress whatsoever. If only she understood more about the nature of this process, maybe she could figure out what she was doing wrong, or how to do it right—but no such luck. She didn't even have someone to emulate this time; she was on her own.

Canopy pulled her hand back, her gaze lingering on her leafy fingers for a bit. The tips had started to lose their color again. She shook her head and reached over into the package of water bottles. She'd given up on rationing her hydration, going so far as to double the usual amount she watered herself just to stay on top of her basic needs. She was a growing tree, after all. She pulled out an empty bottle and put it back with a grumpy sigh, reaching for another one.

At the third empty bottle, she got more annoyed; after five, she began to worry. As she tipped the box over and realized she'd gone through the whole thing, her heart woke up and added its own drumline to the rising panic she was feeling. This was bad. Shouldn't her package have been delivered by now? It was bad enough her phone was almost out of power again; she didn't want to wither away because of postage delays! She quickly clicked the device on and tapped over to the Lighthouse app to see her order's status.

ORDER DELIVERED

Oh no.

Canopy frantically turned to the side, searching her entire vicinity for the new box, to no avail. It wasn't here. She looked beyond the boxes next to her and to the interior door, which Renée had closed after her last visit (as she had been doing). Enough water for a week and it was just beyond her reach. Why hadn't the postal worker dropped it off like last time?! Had Canopy forgotten to specify it? She quickly looked through the order notes but no, there it was, same as always.

please deliver inside interior door & water the plant  
(thank you for bearing with me)

Had Renée become fed up with her? Had she been busy? Was it something Canopy had done? She wracked her brain trying to figure out the answer. Then it hit her: Renée had said something about one final rush before the break. Canopy figured she had meant the holidays, but... could she have been talking about a vacation? Oh no. What if someone else was doing her route now? Of course they wouldn't know the code. They'd think this instruction was weird. Maybe even demanding. And meanwhile here she was, a still-entirely-too-small plant girl wilting from lack of water. At least she wasn't hurting for sunlight, both artificial and not.

She looked up at her phone's battery, wincing at how low the percentage had gotten. She needed to do something, and soon. And as much as she dreaded letting someone else into her home, well... withering away was way worse, wasn't it? She tapped over to the group chat. It was still very early, earlier than most folks would find it reasonable to wake up. So of course Nell was online, having never gone to sleep at all. Canopy wasted no time in sending her a private message.

**Cano\_P:** help  
**NellDotWham:** what's wrong?  
**NellDotWham:** omg are you okay  
**Cano\_P:** no water  
**Cano\_P:** delivery out of reach  
**NellDotWham:** oh no

Tears started welling up in Canopy's eyes as she frantically tapped out her messages letter by letter. She didn't like feeling this vulnerable. She didn't like putting her needs out there. But she had to. So once again she dragged herself kicking and screaming into a place where she could ask for help.

**NellDotWham:** how can I help? I'll let the others know  
**Cano\_P:** i dont know  
**Cano\_P:** can u send someone

Canopy knew so few people she'd feel comfortable letting into her home. But right now, no matter how much she wanted to stay alone, she also had to stay safe—and that meant letting someone in. If this was a matter of trust, then... she trusted Nell. And she could trust her to make the right call.

**NellDotWham:** of course!!  
**Cano\_P:** someone safe  
**Cano\_P:** please



She furiously tapped at the on-screen keyboard through the tears and the rapid beating of her heart, sending over her address and the code to her apartment door. She didn't like sharing them. It took so much trust for her to share one, much less both, but here she was. To survive, she had to let someone in.

**NellDotWham:** I'm on it

**NellDotWham:** please hang in there <3

**Cano\_P:** thank u

And with that, out of breath and energy, Canopy shut down.

# Growing Closer

"Did we get 'em?" the mossy pile of crumbled rocks asked as Janice walked her character over to administer some first aid. Or in this case, some techno-magical resurrection.

"Yeah!" Nell said as she handed out some potions. "It was a close call, but we won. Clutch save by Double at the last second there."

The diminutive support-of-all-trades crossed their arms. "I felt like off-tanking today."

"You should tell us when you're in trouble, kiddo," Janice chided as she brought Canopy back to life with a swarm of animate bandages. "We can't help if we don't know."

"As good as this game's UI is," Nell said, "the info we get about everyone else isn't as detailed as our own. And this boss is really rude with stuns and obscure debuffs. We gotta communicate, yeah?"

"Yeah!" Vernon added absent-mindedly from his side of the battleground, looking over the loot their large foe had dropped.

"Mm," Canopy grunted, looking down at the grass texture. "It's just..."

"Just what?" Nell asked.

"Y'know, everyone's... real chatty," Canopy finally said. "There's a lot of calls and such. I don't want to interrupt. I'm not sure when."

"That's fair!" Janice said. "We'll make more room for you."

"And, you know," Canopy added, "I don't know if I have anything important to say anyway. I can just do better and not bother you all."

"Now, that's not fair," Janice replied, pointing at Canopy's character in as admonishing a way as the prepackaged emotes would allow. "You're important! Your needs are important! Speak up and we'll sort the rest out together. Alright?"

Canopy sighed with a hint of a smile. "Alright," she said.

# Housekeeping

Canopy stretched her legs and wiggled her toes, letting the dirt and sand flow around them. She wasn't sure why she was dreaming about her time in *OwO* so much lately. Maybe she just needed a change of pace. But why mess with this safe coziness? She had everything she needed right now: warmth, a cool breeze, the bubbling sound of the ocean waves lapping at her lazily, and as much sun as she could ever want. Filtered through the leaves of the great tree above her, of course.

Wait. She'd gone through this before. There was no tree, was there? *She* was the tree. Those leaves were hers; she was the one soaking up the sun, drinking in the waves, and wiggling her roots. Yeah. How silly of her. But that's how every morning was nowadays: it took a while for reality to fully set in. That was fine. She wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere, even if she could, so she'd cross that bridge when she got to it. There was plenty of time until things got colder.

...Wait. No, it was winter. Right? But then what about the ocean—

Canopy opened her eyes. She was home. It all came flooding back to her in a matter of seconds. She was home! The lamp, the bean bag, her phone... water! She could hear the ocean again! That meant... She shook the last sleepy cobwebs free and grew back into her new self, turning to look back at her kitchen. There, up on the counter, was the humidifier: turned back on and bubbling away. The air felt nice and cozy again! The soil was moist! She looked down at the mix of all-natural filler around her roots. Someone had watered it. She was safe! She was going to be okay! She was... not alone.

The mother of all chills ran up the place where her spine would have been as she turned to the right and slowly looked up at a looming raven-haired figure crouching by her, meeting her eyes with a calm but focused gaze.

"Good morning, Canopy," Double said through the mask covering their nose and mouth.

Canopy instantly retracted back into a tree. She didn't know why she did it; it just happened, almost on instinct. But of course Double had already noticed her. There was no sense in hiding. Still, that's what every fiber of her being was telling her to do at this moment.

There was a bit of silence. Then Double spoke up again. "Take your time," they said as they shuffled slightly in place, reaching for something in the pockets of the hoodie they were wearing over a frilly multi-layered dress. Their phone, Canopy figured, as she soon heard the telltale sound of fingers tapping on glass. A strangely soothing sound, it turned out.



Once the sudden rush of surprise and inexplicable embarrassment had faded, the small sapling shifted back into her humanlike features and looked up at Double once again. "Hi," Canopy said.

"Nell says hi," they replied, eyes on their phone, still crouched effortlessly low to the ground. Attempting any position even close to that would have wrecked the old Canopy for the rest of the day. She remembered trying that exactly once.

Gosh, this brought back so many memories of conventions past, of times they sold art prints together. Of Double wearing the mask and gloves on days they knew they'd have to interact with strangers.

Or strange places.

"Hi," the plant girl repeated. "Thank you," she added after a moment.

"Glad to help," Double said as they turned their phone down and turned their head to look at their friend again. The cartoony shark teeth printed on their mask gave the diminutive artist a much more menacing aura than they probably intended.

Double was the shortest member of their group and by far the most fashionable, picking up (or starting) new trends at the drop of a hat. And speaking of hats, the one they were wearing today was one of those tiny top hats on a headband. Canopy furrowed her brow. What were those called again? Fascinators?

"*Archontophoenix alexandrae*. A solid choice."

"Archonto-what? Phoenix?" Canopy replied, taken aback. "Oh, the uh, the kind of palm tree? Is that... is that what I—wait, choice? What do you mean choice? I didn't—"

"It was in the references we sent. We're assuming that was the first time you saw it, since it's not a stereotypical palm tree and it's not endemic to this place. It may have left an impression." They tilted their head. "Maybe it wasn't a conscious choice. But odds are it *was* one."

Canopy looked down at herself, then raised her hands closer to her face, wiggling her frondlike fingers. "The design caught my eye, I guess. It had this neat... skirt thing," she said, motioning in a mock curtsy where her waist was. Or would be. It was still hard to tell.

Double followed her gaze. "You really did mean plant *girl*."

"Heheh, yeah," Canopy replied, trying but failing to hide her goofy grin. "That's me!" The plant girl's smile then shifted into a more pensive look. "Well... for the most part," she added. "I'm still figuring that out."

"Cool," Double said with a nod. They looked at their phone again, tapping through some content. "Inflorescence."

"Inflowhat?"

"Inflorescence, the 'frilly skirt thing'—it'll grow in later." They turned their phone back off. "It's where the flowers and the fruits come from."

"F... f-flowers? *Fruits*?" Canopy sputtered, her cheeks becoming speckled with red.

"Maybe. You seem to be the first this has ever happened to, so who can say? Hup!" Double sprang up to a standing position, walking around the pile of bean bag remains and clothing that had become the sapling girl's makeshift planter. Carefully staying out of the direct path of the sun lamp. "You keep this place very warm."

"Yeah, I know," the plant girl said, looking aside. "That's what everyone always says."

Double walked over to the kitchen, keeping clear of any boxes or furniture. They brought their phone back up, checking something. "You looked at this as soon as you woke up," they said, pointing to the humidifier. "Why?"

"I... kinda like the sound it makes. Reminds me of the ocean. It had gotten really dry since it, uh..." Canopy sighed, realizing that there was nothing she needed to hide from Double any longer. "Since the power outage turned it off."

Double nodded as they examined it closely. "It seems fairly standard. Did you buy it that day?"

"The day before that stream? Yeah, along with a bunch of other stuff." Canopy scratched the back of her head, rustling some leaves. "Janice encouraged me to kick my winter depression, so I kinda went a bit wild. Why?"

"Narrowing down the possibilities." They tapped the edge of their mask with the back of a gloved finger. "Could be in the air. Could be something that was introduced to your home. What else did you buy?"

"Uh... The tablet arm, the lamp... Oh! The bean bag too," Canopy said, looking down at the pile of fabric around her. "Though I guess it's sort of a mess now. It was filled with this weird stuff."

Double looked up from taking notes on their phone. "Wait. That's a bean bag? We thought it was some sort of plant bed or..." They tiptoed closer, peeked at the opening Canopy had been growing out of. They tilted their head. "Why did you fill a bean bag with soil?"

"I didn't! I've just been growing in it! It's like, all-natural or something!"

Double furrowed their brow. "Do you have the instructions?"

"It's... it's a bean bag, Double. You just put it on the floor. Why would it have—"

"What about this?" they asked, crouching down next to a small card that was the same bright orange color as the deflated seat.

Canopy had completely forgotten about it ever since it hit the floor those months ago. "Oh! I mean that's not technically, uh... But yeah, that was in the box."

Double picked it up and unfolded it. "Thank you for choosing... All-natural ingredients... Buckwheat hulls, dried field peas..." They looked over to Canopy, eyes wide. "You've been growing out of organic cushion

filler?! How are you not dead?"

Canopy threw her hands up. "I don't know! It holds water just fine! What's the problem?"

The diminutive artist stood back up, refraining from pinching the bridge of their nose at the last second once they realized they were still wearing gloves. They resorted to simply shaking their head. "Canopy, that's not... For a starter plant, maybe! That's not made to hold water, it has almost zero nutrients. You can't thrive like this! You need proper soil, or you're never going to grow."

Canopy stared up at the diminutive artist for a solid moment, a bit taken aback by this uncharacteristic burst of passion. A complicated mix of feelings crashed against each other inside her to the sound of the beat of her heart, along with an unusual fiery desire to talk back. But before the fire inside her got any more heated, it was tempered by the realization that her friend cared about her. "Oh... okay," she finally said, processing this information. "I'll order some."

Double exhaled sharply, returning to a more relaxed position. "We'll send you some links," they said. Then, a moment later, "Sorry."

"No, it's okay. I'm sorry too, I..." Canopy replied, sighing. She wasn't used to people in her life being worried about her, let alone to the point of being this passionate about it. Her heart had calmed down a little, but refused to go completely silent. She wasn't quite sure why. "I guess I'm still not very good at taking care of myself," she added, almost whispering.

Double shifted their sling bag around to the front, rooting around in it. "Before we forget, let's get you set up."

"Set up?"

"Community principles," Double said as they pulled out a fancy-looking surge protector. "Make them sustainable, help them grow."

Canopy blinked, trying to wrap her mind around what her friend was saying. "I'm... I'm not a garden," she replied with a slight huff.

"But you are a neighbor," Double said, stepping around again to duck behind the desk and gently pull at some cables. "Got it." They plugged the extension cord in and made sure to leave it next to the computer tower, within easy reach.

"Wait," Canopy said as the reality of the situation caught up with her. "We're neighbors? You *live* here?!"

"Not neighbor-neighbors." Double stepped back out, pulling out an extra phone cable and plugging it into one of the surge protector's dedicated device ports. "A metro ride away." They handed the other end of the cable to Canopy.

"All this time... Wait! We went to the same conventions! We could've taken the same plane! Or train, or bus! You've known I was here the whole time, right? How could you not? Why didn't you say anything?!"

Double turned around, looking at the shelf between the kitchen and the hallway, upon which the sun lamp had been mounted haphazardly so many weeks ago. "We don't like people knowing where we live," they said.

Canopy just looked at them for a while, then nodded. "Yeah, that's fair." All the hurt and anger that had so suddenly welled up inside her left just as fast. How could she fault them for doing the exact same thing she always did? She understood that worry all too well.

Double traced the path of the cable from the smart outlet up to the lamp. "So, this is it?"

"Oh, my sun lamp? Uh, yeah. I have it on a timer so I don't, like, burn out. And get some sleep too, though I guess I don't really need darkness to do that now."

"Instructions?"

"Maybe...? I don't remember throwing them out. They should be nearby, or in the box I guess. I kinda just shoved all the packaging in the corner and figured I'd throw it out later." Canopy scratched the back of her head again. "But I can't really get to it now."

"We'll find them." Double moved toward the darkened hallway that led to the apartment's bathroom and single bedroom, pulling at the stack of discarded boxes.

"Mm." Canopy thought back to how progressively solitary her local life had become. Why had she stopped seeing so many friends, why had she stopped hanging out? Her brain tried to offer the same tired reasons, but somehow none of them made much sense. She was so excited at the thought of being social now! It was equal parts exhilarating and disquieting. What a difference a couple of months could make. "Hey, you wanna like... grab brunch sometime?"

The focused fashionista stood in place silently, their back turned.

"Double?"

"Found the instructions," they said, looking up from the double-sided sheet of obfuscated technicalese.

"Oh."

"Maybe," they added, "but not now. You shouldn't be outside right now."

"Yeah," Canopy said somberly. This was a big step for her: hanging out with a friend, in person. She couldn't even begin to approach existing in a city full of people yet. "Outside is scary right now."

"It's winter," Double said. "Trees shouldn't be outside in winter. Not palm trees. Not here."

"Right! Right, yeah, of course. That's what I, uh... that makes sense."

"Can I take a picture of this?" Double asked, waving the instruction sheet.

"Uh yeah, sure!" Canopy answered, a bit lost in thought. It was



winter, something she kept forgetting. To be fair, her mind was in a million places right now. The holidays were coming, and she'd keep growing, and become more independent... But sooner or later she'd have to leave. Right? She couldn't stay in here forever.

"Is this okay?"

"What?"

"Is this height okay?" Double repeated as they lowered Canopy's drawing tablet, adjusting the ergonomic arm it was mounted on.

"Oh," the sapling girl said. "Oh! Oh my gosh! Yes!" She reached up excitedly, able to finally touch the art tool she'd been separated from all this time. She ran her leafy fingers over the screen, experimentally clicking the extra function buttons along the side. Her eyes went wide as she remembered what one of them did. She pressed it.

With a loud click and a quiet whirr, her computer sprang back to life.

"It's back! My PC's back!" Canopy shouted in adorable high-pitched glee. "I can draw again!"

Double busied themselves as the plant girl reached for the dedicated stylus clipped to the side of the tablet. Canopy was too absorbed in setting up her computer after weeks and weeks of disuse to notice them putting empty boxes away and lining up the latest mail-order packages within her reach. Only when she finally snapped out of it did she notice her new setup.

"Oh!" Canopy said, looking up as Double was putting their boots back on. "Oh my gosh, thank you! Are you leaving already?"

"Classes don't wait," Double said. "If you need anything else, call us."

"Oh," Canopy replied, losing her cheer. It had been so unfathomably long since she had a friend over, and now they were leaving as quickly as they'd arrived. "Okay. Uh, take care."

Double nodded, stepping back into the lobby and reaching for the outside door. Then they stopped. "Right," they said, stepping back to the threshold between the lobby and the apartment proper. They crouched down and reached over, handing Canopy a small sticky note. "This was on the door. Almost missed it."

"What?" she asked as she accepted the small slip of paper. "Going on break... now that the power's back, good luck with the plant'... oh my gosh it's from Renée! She was on vacation! Okay!"

Canopy smiled with relief. Renée didn't hate her; she was just taking time off. And she even left some gardening tips! It all made sense now. That's why she hadn't brought the packages in. Come to think of it...

"Hey, Double? Where was my order?"

"Just out in the hall, by the door. No one touched them. Nice neighbors. You all set?"

The plant girl nodded. "Yeah, yeah," she replied. Renée would be

back from vacation soon. And that meant Canopy could order anything she needed, just like before.

Double nodded, pointing at the door between themselves and Canopy. "Open or closed?"

"Huh? Oh! Half! Just open a little, please." The sapling girl's eyes suddenly went wide. She'd almost forgotten the most important thing! "And thank you! Thank you so much!"

Double made a quick V with their fingers before heading out and closing the door.

Just like that, Canopy was alone again.

But that was okay, she figured. She was safe, she had water, her essentials were within easy reach...

Her attention turned to the art tablet as it lit up, displaying her computer's desktop.

...and finally, at long last, she could draw again.

**Strawberryjan:** Hey that's a lot better! You're doing great, kiddo!

**Cano\_P:** thanks <3 finally getting the hang of it

**vern\_notice:** man, it must suck to have to relearn all that

**Cano\_P:** well not exactly, just gotta get used to the hands

**Cano\_P:** and grow some more so i can grip the stylus better haha

**Strawberryjan:** Grow more hands???

**Cano\_P:** wh

**Cano\_P:** nonono grow taller!!

**Cano\_P:** like, i grew, and im gonna grow some more so im bigger

**Strawberryjan:** THANK GOODNESS

**vern\_notice:** ok but if you did grow more hands you could draw more

**NellDotWham:** ahaha glad to hear you're growing! that's good, right?

**Strawberryjan:** Have all the calls been helping?

**Cano\_P:** yeah i think so

**Strawberryjan:** :)

**Cano\_P:** i have streams on the side monitor most of the time

**Cano\_P:** one day ill be able to reach my keyboard again

**Cano\_P:** onscreen ones are awkward

**Double:** ("\_\_\_)人(\_\_\_\_")

**vern\_notice:** oh nice!! gonna be ready for our game stream?

**Cano\_P:** yup! just gotta keep growing

**Strawberryjan:** Is that lamp helping you out?

**Cano\_P:** yeah its like my own lil sub

**Cano\_P:** sun\*

**NellDotWham:** omg

**Cano\_P:** SUN

**Double:** We haven't found the seller yet.

**NellDotWham:** oh yeah how's the investigation going?

**Strawberryjan:** I still think that bean bag is really suspicious.

\* Double has shared a link.

**Double:** But I did find the manufacturer.

**Strawberryjan:** For the lamp? I'll look them up & check the reviews!

**Double:** They make greenhouse equipment.

**Strawberryjan:** Wait

**Cano\_P:** youre kidding me

**Strawberryjan:** When I said a lamp I meant a THERAPY LAMP!!

**Double:** We can't find the specific model. It may not exist.

**NellDotWham:** oh my gosh you bought an actual cursed item

**vern\_notice:** f

# Burgeoning Anticipation

Canopy looked outside, drawing the curtains open just a little more. The snowflakes were so large she could easily see them from where she was standing. Or sitting. Or whatever you wanted to call it when a tree that was also a person decided to lean back and relax a bit. She put her plastic grabby-claw back up against her desk and returned to her work.

It had been just a couple of weeks, but she'd grown up surprisingly fast. She was almost back to the height she'd become accustomed to while drawing, though without a chair. A lot of good that bean bag had done for her actual posture, she thought, as she looked down at the hole torn into it. To think, that opening had been her only window into the world when this all started. Now, a few months and a lot of adjustments later, it was just where she rested her feet. Or, well, feet-equivalents.

Canopy wiggled her roots, sifting through the particles of technically-not-soil that surrounded them. True to their word, Double had given her a slew of recommendations for proper plant growth mediums, and she'd finally relented. She had to admit, she'd been feeling more energetic since she started following their advice. A single bag unceremoniously emptied into the mix of cushion filler and she was growing like a weed!

One day, she would probably need to replace the whole thing with a proper planter. Gosh, how weird would that be? How would *that* delivery go? Would she need help to, uh... re-plant herself?

Canopy looked down. She could feel her roots were holding steady, but to be honest there were so many of them that it was hard to keep track of tactile sensations down there. She idly wondered just how exactly she had gotten such a solid grip, but didn't want to risk looking too closely. It's not like she could've just merged with the floorboards or anything; that's not how trees worked. Right?

The telltale rhythmic sound of footsteps coming up the stairs gently shook her out of her *rêverie*. Delivery time; Renée was on her way up. Canopy barely had time to turn to the side and look at the door before it swung open, the postal worker carrying the day's package inside.

"Anybody in?" Renée asked as she pulled up her keypad. She shot a quick glance across the lobby, her eyes meeting Canopy's.

The plant girl could only muster a goofy smile.

Renée grinned. "Hey there."

"Hi!" Canopy replied, her face shedding the initial awkwardness as she beamed with joy.

Renée stepped in to drop off the parcel, reaching over with her free hand to ruffle Canopy's hair-fronds. "Hard at work already, huh?"

"Yup! I've really been flying through commissions. It's going super well!"

"That's great! You'll be back in shape in no time. Sign here, please."

Canopy reached over to give the keypad a quick doodle. "Thank you!"

"Of course! I aim to please." Renée gave the signature a look. "Still the same one, huh?"

"Uh, yeah!" Canopy laughed nervously, scratching the back of her head. "I'm working on the whole rebranding thing. It's a lot." She took a deep breath. "Hey, uh, I was thinking... if you're not super busy today, would you like to stay for coffee or hot chocolate or something?"

The postal worker turned to look at the intercom on the wall. "Are you expecting anyone?"

The plant girl followed Renée's gaze, a bit confused. "Huh? Why?" No one was ringing the doorbell, so why—

*BZZZZZZT!*

Canopy yelped loudly as the buzzer jolted her awake.

Had she fallen asleep again? What time was it? Was it still morning, or—delivery! Right, delivery! Someone was coming up the stairs! She had to act fast.

Practically on autopilot at this point, Canopy hit the corner shortcut button on her art tablet and pushed it as far away as she could. She did a quick visual sweep of her immediate area: nothing out of place, enough room for new packages, and the little surprise she'd prepared tucked away next to the door, as planned. As the computer went through its preprogrammed fast sleep routine, Canopy lifted her arms and closed her eyes.

By the time Renée had punched in the door code and stepped in to drop off the day's order, nothing was out of the ordinary. Save for the palm tree growing in the middle of the apartment's living room, of course. But she'd probably gotten used to that by now.

"Morning, baby girl," Renée said as she carefully put the first box down, then the second. "You've been doing a lot better! Glad your roomie's taking better care of you." She tapped away at her keypad for a moment, the sharp boops and beeps piercing the air.

Then she paused.

"Wait. Really?" Renée took a step back, looking around. "Please look for the bag... What bag?" she asked out loud. There was a pause. Then an "oh!" followed by a stiff paper rustle. The postal worker chuckled. "You didn't! Oh fine, fine. Just this once. Happy holidays to you too."

Canopy's senses were always very... different when she was in tree mode. Not dulled, exactly; more like shifted, spread out. She couldn't see per se, but she had such a bigger awareness of the air around her, how it reverberated, how it gently washed over her every leaf and limb.

She wasn't quite sure why, but she really did like listening to people's voices. It made her body tingle ever so slightly; it made her heart beat faster.

Especially Renée's voice.

"You'll never guess what your roommate got me," she said. "A gardening tool set! Comes in its own little tote bag, too. It's so tiny!" Renée laughed heartily with a smile so wide Canopy could hear it. "You give advice on how to take care of a plant *once* and suddenly you're The Gardener, to be gifted gardening things you already own." She examined the set more closely, unfolding what sounded like a card. "Indoor gardening eh? Well, these won't go to waste. Small tools could be good for small hands."

Canopy smiled inwardly. Part of her had wanted to thank Renée for her help when she needed it; another part of her really had to make sure the postal worker wasn't angry at her. And yet another part really, really wanted to have one more excuse to hear her voice.

"Speaking of indoor gardening, you are growing *real* fast. I'm not sure what possessed your roomie to grow a palm tree here of all places, but I hope you've got a spot ready outside for the spring! I know we're all doing our best, but you mess with a tree, you mess with me."

There came more rustling, and an electronic *beep*.

"Alright, I really need to go. Take care now!"

And with that, she was gone.

Canopy slowly unfurled her human side again, letting out a long breath of relief. That had gone about as well as she could have hoped. She was still on good terms with Renée, the postal worker had gotten her holiday gift, and... Right. A spot outside for springtime. That was a thing that had been said.

That was months away; a time far enough away that Canopy hadn't really considered that it existed at all. But now there was an uncomfortable note pinned to that deadline: going outside. The plant girl figured she couldn't really stay indoors forever, but... Would she really need to go out? Like, on a permanent basis? She liked it here! She didn't want to go! Sure, the sun was nice, and even the best air conditioner couldn't measure up to a cool summer breeze, but... She didn't want to have to live outside. How would she draw? How would she be online all the time?

How would she keep herself safe?

Canopy didn't want to think about that too much. That was far, far down the line; she had other things to worry about. And besides, that advice was for trees: who said she'd grow that tall anyway? Maybe she'd stop at her old person-size. Maybe she'd be able to stay inside.

Though the thought of digging her roots in one of the local parks and just basking in the sun seemed... nice. Hm.

It did imply replanting herself somewhere else, though. How would she do that? Could she ask someone to carry her?

Someone strong, for example? Someone good with plants *and* lifting heavy things?

Canopy's heart had started beating quickly again. She took a couple of quick breaths and returned her attention to her computer, bringing it back out of sleep mode with a button press. She looked at her webcam, wondering if her face had gotten red. She didn't exactly have the same skin anymore; it was tinged with green, and the texture felt somewhat different. Could she blush? *Would* she blush?

Was she blushing right now?

"Anyway!" Canopy said to no one in particular as she reached for the day's packages. One thing at a time! She had some new streaming gear to set up, and—wait. There was one extra box than what she expected. Had Renée made a mistake? Was she going to come back?! Canopy quickly tilted her head, trying to make out the sound of footsteps in the stairwell, finger hovering over the emergency sleep button so she wouldn't be discovered.

Thankfully, no Renée. And besides, on second look, the package was addressed to her. She went to open it, wondering why the thought of being discovered in plant girl mode was suddenly ringing so many bells at the moment. Had she talked about it with her friends? Had she dreamed—

Oh.

Canopy's face went red as she suddenly remembered the dream she'd been woken from. Where had *that* come from? It had felt so... comfortable? Natural? To just talk with Renée like that, matter-of-factly, like friends. Or maybe, like...

She shook her head, trying to keep her heart from beating its way out of her chest. Not right now. She had other things to think about. Like this mystery package! It had come through Lighthouse, so there was probably nothing to worry about; maybe someone had bought something off of her wishlist? She quickly opened it up.

Then smiled.



**Cano\_P:** thanks for the festive lights, double <3

**Double:** ｡\*:★<(◡)^(◡)>:° ★｡

**Strawberryjan:** Aww!

**NellDotWham:** yesss you got the present!

**Double:** We can all use some holiday cheer.

**Cano\_P:** yeah uh

**Cano\_P:** my apartment is kinda barren haha

**vern\_notice:** whoa are you gonna decorate your place too?

**Strawberryjan:** Vern, since when do you care about home decoration?

**vern\_notice:** since always!! my holiday parties are legendary

**vern\_notice:** when I host, I go all out

**NellDotWham:** oh nice!

**Cano\_P:** hmm

**Cano\_P:** not sure how to set these up

**Cano\_P:** wait i got an idea

**vern\_notice:** oh right do you want me to update the overlay

**Cano\_P:** what

**vern\_notice:** for the stream

**vern\_notice:** you know, name etc

**Cano\_P:** oh

**Cano\_P:** ive been meaning to like

**Cano\_P:** make an announcement

**NellDotWham:** <3

**Cano\_P:** not yet

**Cano\_P:** ill let u know

# Ability Tree

"Alright guys, we're just about ready to get going!" Vernon said to the audience, as the flow of new viewers started to slow and stabilize. "The gates are about to open onto Aizo Acié and the Verninators are gonna get front row seats! Everybody ready?"

Stream chat flooded with excited replies and emoticons as everyone else in the voice call piped up. Canopy would have, too, but she was having a bit of streaming jitters. She said as much in the private group chat, doing her best to steady her nerves. Or whatever the plant equivalent was. Did trees have nerves? She made a mental note to look that up later.

It felt like she had signed up for it ages ago, but here it was: their first *Other world Online* stream together since... *everything* happened. Canopy had volunteered herself not knowing whether or not she'd have grown enough to be ready for it, but this time, pushing herself out of her comfort zone had turned out okay. Thanks to Double's help, she'd gotten some proper nutrition—she curled her lip into that icky expression again at the thought—and the quiet holiday season had given her ample time to catch up to her desk. Constantly playing friends' streams and videos in the background had helped a lot, too, though she'd made sure to mute it whenever Renée dropped something off, on the off chance she'd get chatter with 'her roommate's exotic plant.' As wonderful as it felt to be surrounded by recorded voices, nothing beat the real thing.

"Kiddo?"

Canopy snapped back to attention, the rapid beating of her heart almost drowning out Janice's voice. "Uh, yeah! I'm here!" the plant girl replied, looking at the character selection screen. She hadn't taken the plunge on updating her Lithopian's personal info quite yet, and time being of the essence, decided she'd get to it another time. A whole new world awaited, after all.

"Alright!" Vernon said as Canopy's character appeared in Toebean Plaza. "The gang's all here! Let's get going!" And with that, the party joined up, and jumped through the portal to the newly-accessible lands of Aizo Acié.

It had been several months since Canopy had even touched this game, but she was pleasantly surprised to discover that she hadn't lost her touch. Playing the party's tank in this game was a bit more accessible than in others she'd tried in the past, so she wasn't too intimidated at the prospect of going fresh into some new content. She just had to stay near the front, keep the attention on herself, and communicate.

Canopy was also surprised at how much easier that last part had gotten.

Before, every request for help required calculated effort. Was it worth bugging her friends for something she could probably handle? What would be worse: interrupting them, or wasting their time because of the domino effect of her character getting put out of commission in the middle of an encounter? And finally, was she ready to hear her own voice? Modulation software or not, she still had to listen to it in her head.

Now, she just spoke up. And that was it. Amazing just how much of a difference it made when putting part of yourself out into the world made you happy.

One thing that made Canopy a bit less happy as the evening went on, though, was seeing the way the stream viewers were referring to her. She didn't begrudge 'Cano' per se; it had been a moniker she'd used for years, one she'd crafted specifically to avoid being called a different name. But now it felt... incomplete. And every time someone typed it out in chat, she regretted a bit more that she'd waited to update her character profile.

She thought she'd be fine keeping that part to herself and her friends for now, but that proved harder and harder with every passing second. She'd spent so long searching for who she was. Now that she'd found herself, she didn't want to wait one more second to shout it from the rooftops.

"Hey, can we wait here for a minute?" Canopy asked as the party hit a rest area. "I just need to uh... change something real quick."

"Sure, that's fine with me," Nell said.

"That's good timing!" Janice added, "I'll go check on the kids, they've been a bit too quiet."

"Yeah alright, let's take a quick break," Vernon said to the sound of furious tapping on his stream deck as he started up an interactive game for the viewers in chat. He always did fuss about people getting bored when the stream hit a slower point.

Double, meanwhile, gave a quick thumbs-up and busied themselves with a bit of impromptu crafting. They liked to keep busy on nights when they weren't feeling chatty.

"Thanks," Canopy said before quitting out of the game and taking a quick trip back to character creation. All she needed to do was to make a couple changes before heading back in: a tweaked name here, some new details there, a few modifications on... no, you know what? Her character model was fine. That part she didn't need to mess with.

"I'm back! Thanks for waiting!" Canopy said as she logged back into the game world, rejoining the others at the threshold of their new adventure.

"Wait," Vernon said as his character performed a dramatic 'pensive'

animation. "Did you really change anything? You're still the same."

The plant girl grinned despite herself behind the computer screen. "That's right," she said.

It took a moment for her friends—and viewers—to catch on. But all it took was for Nell to spot the update and say "Canopy!" for everyone else to quickly jump onboard. A small part of Canopy had been dreading what folks' reaction would be, but for all his rough edges, Vernon had curated a primarily positive audience, and that made a big difference. Coupled with the fact that a lot of the viewers who usually caught the streams of the artists in the group tended to check out their *Other world Online* streams too, the resulting bundle of people spamming Canopy's new username in chat were very supportive. And curious.

```
ohhh I get it  
Is that a new voicemod?  
C A N O _ P  
doesn't sound like one
```

"That's right!" The plant girl laughed. "It's not a new voice mod, this is what I sound like." She watched as replies and comments scrolled by. "Yeah! I've been working on it!"

The warm welcome put Canopy in such a good mood that the evening went by in a flash. Before she knew it, the group was winding down for the night, shifting into a new Q&A format Vernon had been working on for the past few weeks. And while most of the party was fine with having their webcam in a roundtable, Canopy wasn't quite ready to show her face to the world. She put up her logo instead in the meantime, making a mental note to find another solution later. Maybe she could dim the lights and pass everything off as a 3D avatar with filters? Or just say it was a really good costume.

```
new logo!!  
its the same logo just turned 180 degrees  
ohhh it's a tree!  
no it's a new pic, you can see the leaves
```

"Oh, I didn't realize you changed your logo, kiddo!" Janice said as she pulled her youngest up onto her lap. "That's a nice design!"

"That's really clever," Nell added. "The canoe really does look like a tree when you flip it like that."

"Yeah, that's slick!" Vernon said. "New style that calls back to the classic brand so the fans don't get lost. Really smooth transition."

"Thank you!" Canopy replied, "it's... been on my mind for a while."

```
:3  
It does fit with the new content!
```

brand%

yeah Canopy really leaning into the new Lithopian lore

"The new what now?" Vernon asked, looking at chat.

"Oh, yeah, I read about that in the newsletter!" Janice said. "That's what the new adventure is about, we're clearing out bad guys that have taken over Lithopian cultural sites. I guess they haven't put a lot of the story in the early access parts yet."

"Huh. Neat."

"Oh, really?" Canopy asked. "I guess I should replay the main quests once it goes live, maybe the NPCs will have extra dialogue since my character's a Lithopian too. Do you think we're finally gonna learn why they're living rocks?"

"Wait, you didn't know?" Nell asked.

"Uhh... know what?"

"Canopy, they're called *Lithopians*. They're based on lithops."

"Is that... a kind of rock?"

Nell laughed sweetly. "No, the rock part is camouflage. Canopy, lithops are a kind of succulent. They're plants."

Canopy just stared at her screen for a bit.

"Ohh!" Janice exclaimed as she clicked at something on her second monitor. "I think my neighbor grows those in their rock garden! I can't believe I never caught on. Hah, all this time I could've asked them about it!"

"Yeah," Canopy said, shaking her head with a helpless smile. "All this time." Then something dawned on her. "Wait. Double, you thought my character was an armadillo! Did you know?"

Double looked up from their phone. They stared at their camera for a moment, then shrugged.

"It's okay, kiddo!" Janice said as she gently helped her child find a more comfortable sitting position. "Sometimes these things just don't come up."

It took until the end of the Q&A segment, and the end of the stream proper, before the embarrassment had died down. Everyone had kept the video call going as they went through the motions of preparing for the night in their own respective ways: Nell catching up on social media, Janice putting her kids to bed. Canopy, meanwhile, didn't really have much to do; she was already ready for bed. Or, well, her equivalent: being a tree for eight hours. She wondered if she'd grow to miss curling up under the covers, but she felt so well-rested after a night of tree-time that she filed that thought away for later.

After double-checking that the stream was indeed offline, she turned her webcam on. "Hey."

"Oh, hey!" Nell said with a big grin. "Look at you! All dressed up for the holidays!"

"Wait, what?" Vernon said from off-screen as he rolled up his green screen.

"Kiddo's wearing the string lights!" Janice said with a guffaw. "Oh, that's lovely. I should draw you like that on the holiday card next year!"

"Nice!" Vernon replied.

Double gave their camera a thumbs-up, hiding their reaction with their other hand.

Canopy smiled, turning her head left and right to make her long leafy locks swish around, leading the colored lights she'd strung up on them into a merry dance. "I couldn't really put them up on the walls, so I figured that was the next best thing, haha."

"Isn't it uncomfortable?" Janice asked.

"Nah, it's fine. I'm... okay, so 'uncomfortable' is kind of weird for me right now. But yeah, this doesn't hurt at all."

"Are you sure?"

Canopy relented with a sigh. "I'll be careful when I take them off, I promise."

"Good!" Janice said. "You know we just want what's best for you."

"Yeah," the plant girl replied, awash with a mix of emotions she couldn't quite put her finger on. A strange sense of love and relief. "I know," she added with a small smile.

**Double:** You need to take down those lights.

**Cano\_P:** Janice leaves hers up for a month though

**Strawberryjan:** I'm not wearing them! You should be gentle with that plant body, you don't know how it works yet.

**Cano\_P:** I'm growing into it!

**Strawberryjan:** har har

**NellDotWham:** for real though, better be safe than sorry with this kind of stuff

**Cano\_P:** yeah fair

**Cano\_P:** I'll take them down

**Cano\_P:** Renée will be happy too

**NellDotWham:** wait omg have you talked to her??

**Cano\_P:** NO WAY I still go back to tree mode when she delivers stuff

**Cano\_P:** she just talks to plants I guess

**Cano\_P:** it's really nice

**Strawberryjan:** I'm glad :)

**Cano\_P:** anyway last time she left a note

**Cano\_P:** 'cute but don't hurt your tree'

**Cano\_P:** so in the next lighthouse order I added a comment that said like 'she likes being colorful! but thanks, I'll be careful'

**Double:** (¬ ¬)

**NellDotWham:** and what did she say?

**Cano\_P:** well

**Cano\_P:** she made this sound

**Cano\_P:** then said something like 'be careful about guessing what a girl likes' but like, not in a note, just out loud

**Cano\_P:** and like I KNOW how the tree feels because I'M the tree but

**Cano\_P:** it's not like I can just come out and say it

**Cano\_P:** do you think she hates me??

**Cano\_P:** is she gonna stop delivering things

**Cano\_P:** what do I do

**NellDotWham:** oh sweetie <3

**Strawberryjan:** Kiddo, it sounds like you're getting really worked up about the delivery lady.

**Strawberryjan:** No matter how she feels, she's got a job to do and it sounds like she goes above and beyond.

**Strawberryjan:** Why does it matter how she feels about you?



# Intertwined

Canopy looked outside, drawing the curtains open just a little more. The sun was so bright she could almost feel the heat emanating from the neighboring building's wall from where she was standing. Or sitting. Or whatever you wanted to call it when a tree that was also a person decided to lean back and relax a bit. She put the plastic grabby-claw back up against her desk and returned to her work.

It had gotten difficult to get anything done recently. She was rapidly outgrowing her apartment, and even the ergonomic arm on her tablet had its limits. It wasn't uncomfortable, per se, she just... She just really wanted to be outside, to bask in the sun. But she couldn't, not as long as her apartment held her captive.

Canopy looked down, having a hard time telling where she ended and the floorboards began. Was she just a part of this place now? Could she even pull up her roots if she wanted to?

"Looks like you need some help."

Canopy turned toward the door to see Renée in her summer uniform, leaning against the wall. The plant girl quickly hid her blushing face, nodding behind her leafy fingers.

"Alright then," the postal worker said with a grin. "Allow me."

Two steps later Renée was next to her, slipping one arm around her back and another behind the lowest part of her trunk. Canopy's breath caught in her throat as she leaned in, reaching up to hold on as best she could. Renée bent down on one knee, affirmed her grip on the plant girl, and in one swift motion lifted the both of them up.

It was like pulling off the biggest, heaviest boots Canopy had ever worn. Her roots tickled as she wiggled them, breathing freely for the first time since she'd grown them—or grown from them, as it were. She exhaled, finally, and couldn't stop herself from letting out a relieved giggle. She was free! She could go out and see the sun again!

Renée smiled with enough confidence to share between the two of them. "See?" she said as she walked back through the door. "Nothing to it."

Canopy watched breathlessly as Renée carried her first out of the apartment, and then down the stairs, toward the waiting light of the midday sun. Just a few more steps, and she'd be outside... Maybe it wouldn't be so scary. She wasn't alone, after all; she didn't need to—

*Beedeeboop! Beedeeboop!*

Wait, Canopy thought. That wasn't the buzzer. What was that sound? Was it... She looked over Renée's shoulder, up the stairs. That couldn't



be a voice call. Her computer was all the way back in her apartment! How on earth—

*Beedeeboop! Beedeeboop!*

Canopy gasped as she jolted awake, face to face with the pop-up window on her monitor. She scrambled to the mouse on her desk with a branch that took its sweet time to turn back into an arm, then quickly clicked to accept the call as she fumbled for her headphones.

Oh, right. No headphones. She hadn't found a model that would fit her yet.

"Hey, Canopy!" Nell said, her voice coming out of the computer speakers.

It took a long moment for the plant girl to wrestle with the pile of complicated feelings her dream had left her with, not to mention reckoning with facts such as where she was and how long she'd been asleep. "Uh, hi," she finally said after what seemed like an eternity. "Good morning. I guess?"

Nell laughed. "You feeling okay? Do you want to do the gathering run later?"

"Oh! Right! Right, the gathering, yeah!" Canopy said as her memories flooded back to her. Nell's free time. New OwO content. 1-on-1 hangout time to fill up on crafting resources. Right! "I'm okay, I'm okay! Sorry, I uh... I think I overslept. I'll get ready! Sorry!"

"No worries, it's okay!" Nell said with a warmth that would've brought the room temperature up a couple degrees, if Canopy didn't already keep it at tropical levels 24/7. "Take your time."

"Thank you!" the plant girl said as she got resituated and reconstituted. Her human side practically grew itself on autopilot now whenever she woke up. It felt kind of nice. She swayed from side to side, going through the limbering exercises she'd started doing to get better acquainted with both parts of her, to let them talk to each other, as it were. As she turned, she shot a glance out the window—snow. Ah, right. It was still winter.

Spring was a ways away yet. She had time.

Canopy looked down at the bright orange bean bag, now a mere fabric container of various types of plant growth mediums, which nonetheless completely obscured what exactly was going on with her roots. Was she just in some dirt? Had she actually dug her many toes into the floorboards, like she'd dreamed so many times now? She couldn't say. And she was still a bit too nervous to take the steps needed to find out.

"Okay," Canopy said as she started the game up. "I'm logging on. Sorry about the wait."

They had agreed to meet up on the cliffs alongside the Aizo Acié coast, which Nell had scouted out beforehand. As was expected of a brand-new area, its resources were a grade above anything they'd

had access to before, which made it a very efficient place to gather materials for their next in-game projects. Nell was focused on crafting the most cutting-edge thing with a cutting edge, while Canopy—ever the generalist—still hadn't picked where to take her skills next. The plant girl figured she'd just enjoy the scenery and fill up on whatever the both of them came across.

As she made her Lithopian character dutifully gather ore droplets, harvest fruits, and replant the leftover seeds, it dawned on Canopy that the view across the horizon was one she was familiar with. She stopped for a moment to take it all in.

"Whatcha looking at?" Nell asked, walking her character over to her cliffside companion. "Oh hey, is that Peace Mountain?" she added, coming to the same conclusion that Canopy had.

"I think so, yeah. It looks a bit different, though."

"It does," Nell said, making her character cross her arms pensively. "Oh! Right, it makes sense. We're seeing the southern side."

"Ohhh! Wow, we're all the way over here?" Canopy said. "I guess I got used to seeing the northern face all those times. It was even on the box art! Well, digital box art."

"Yeah! Gosh, remember those nights grinding for gear right above the starter valley?"

"Oh yeah! The view was just like that. Huh. It feels weird to be on the other side now."

"Mm," Nell said. "Hah, that sounds familiar."

Canopy couldn't help but smile a little. "Yeah. I really liked those chill hangout nights, just the two of us. I still think about them."

"Yeah," Nell replied, letting out a long breath as they both took in the horizon. Then she added, "You were talking about something other than your career that night, weren't you?"

Canopy froze at the keyboard. She would have liked to say she hadn't given that talk of theirs much thought since, but that would have been a lie. She still had dreams about it, to this day. "Yeah," she finally answered.

Nell laughed. "I can't believe I didn't catch on," she said as her character made a show of shaking her head. "You could've said something! I love to talk about that stuff!"

"I..." Canopy began, searching for the right words. "I was scared."

"Ah, that's fair. Gender can be scary stuff."

"Yeah."

"But look at you, though!" Nell said, quickly shifting back into her usual cheer. "Something weird happened, and you're a plant girl! You figured it out."

"Yeah!" Canopy let out a very audible breath. "For the most part."

Nell turned to face her. "Yeah?"

Canopy's plant side swelled with pride. She'd just gone and said it! No wriggling out of this! No hesitation, no wishy-washy dismissals, no putting it off until next time—she *said it*. Score another point for personal growth. Of course, now she had to deal with the consequences of her actions, but that was a problem for her human side. A technical victory!

For a brief moment, Canopy wondered if one side of her could metaphorically stick their tongue out at the other.

"Yeah," the plant girl finally said. "I mean... I like being a plant girl! That's me! But also, like... I don't hate this?" She had her character stand up and do one of her combat poses. "I like this model, the way it's very... open to interpretation. It's freeing. If that makes sense?"

"It does," Nell reassured. "Is that why you haven't changed it?"

"Kinda," Canopy replied. "It's not like there aren't like... Lithopian models that look more feminine, but... ugh. I dunno. This is hard to put into words." She let out a long sigh. "That's why I asked you if you were worried about making the wrong choice, way back then. I'm still not sure I'm making the right one, as good as this feels."

"Well, you—"

"And I don't want to imply I don't like the way I am now!" The plant girl couldn't contain the torrent of words she'd been holding in for so long. "I do! I really do! I wouldn't have put so much effort into growing a body I didn't like! But like... Like... Aaaaa!! What if I'm messing it up?! What if I pick wrong?" Canopy scrunched her hands up against her face, leafy fingers not very good at soaking up tears. "I'm scared," she added shakily. "I'm scared of giving up something I like."

Nell stepped in closer, giving as much comfort as one 3D avatar could give to another. "Hey," she said quietly. "You don't have to give up anything."

"...Mm?" Canopy said in a barely intelligible whisper.

"You know you can be both, right?"

Canopy stared at her monitor. "...Both?"

"Yeah. You can be a girl, you can be something else. You can be a girl *and* something else. You can be lots of things! I mean, you already are, right?"

The plant girl looked down at herself, at her strangely pliable trunk, at her fingers made of leaves. She wiggled them, as naturally as she would have before all this happened. "I guess I am."

"There you go!" Nell said. "Gender's already scary enough, there's no need to let words and categories make it any scarier. If you find some that resonate with you, that's great! But it's not a slider, like your character's height. It's a spectrum." She stepped back and motioned to the hills behind the two of them: the highs, the lows, the nooks and crannies, the parts they couldn't see. "It's a whole field."

Canopy pulled up her in-game character profile, clicking over to the *Gender* section. "A text field," she said with a chuckle.

Name: Cano\_P  
Species: Lithopian  
Gender: a great big shrug  
Pronouns: any  
Class: Protector  
Level: 89

Nell laughed. "Yeah, exactly! You put what you want in there," she said as she sat back down next to Canopy's character. "You can change it, erase it, rewrite it. Even add to it. Whatever feels like you."

Canopy clicked a couple of places, tapped a few keys, and... there. Perfect.

Name: Cano\_P  
Species: Lithopian  
Gender: a great big shrub  
Pronouns: she/her  
Class: Protector  
Level: 89

Canopy smiled, having located some tissues to wipe away her tears with. "Thanks, Nell."

"Anytime! I've been there."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah! Listen, this is... Okay, so I don't know exactly how it works when you like, transition by way of turning into a *hecking tree*, but this is a stressful time, you know? It's another puberty. It's a lot! We're all embarrassing messes for the first year or two."

"You... you were a mess?" the plant girl asked, incredulous. "But you're so... *together!*"

Nell laughed louder than Canopy had ever heard her laugh before. "Oh I was a capital-M *Mess*. When I say we've all been there, I mean it. Try not to sweat it too much, alright? It happens, we grow, we learn."

"I *have* been doing a lot of growing."

"That's the spirit!"

"Yeah!" Canopy stretched her arms up and out, gently leaning back with a relieved sigh.

"So, anything else weighing on your mind, before all those spineblossoms and turtleferns grow back?"

"Well..." Canopy said, her thoughts going back to the dream she'd been pulled from right before the two of them logged on. "How do you, uh, tell someone you like them?"

"Oh I *wish* I could help you with that! Unfortunately, I'm a giant

disaster when it comes to crushes.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah! I mean, I don’t shout it from the rooftops, but, yeah.”

“Oh.”

“For what it’s worth though, you should probably tell them sooner rather than later. Don’t sit on those feelings for too long.”

Canopy took a deep breath, more for her personal comfort than any physical need. But then again, she’d gotten used to that. Going through that particular motion was a calming exercise at this point. “Okay. If you think so.”

“I do! Especially if it’s someone you know.” Nell leaned in a bit closer to her microphone, probably for effect more than anything else. “Is it someone *I* know?” she asked in a whisper.

“Uh... yeah.”

Nell leaned in even closer. “Is it Double?”

Canopy LEANED back away from her monitor, wide-eyed, her mind scrambling to process that particular possibility. “N-no??” she finally answered. “I... uh. Well, I don’t... I don’t *think?*”

“Haha I’m sorry! I’ll stop asking about it.”

“No no, it’s okay! It’s just... Ugh. Gosh, I really am a mess.”

Nell walked her character over to Canopy’s once more and performed a minor incantation, showering the Lithopian in a sparkling ray of light.

“Wh—”

“Bless this mess.”

**Cano\_P:** so uh

**Cano\_P:** I think I figured out the whole

**Cano\_P:** "for the most part"

**Cano\_P:** thing

**Double:** (•\_\_•)?

**Cano\_P:** Nell helped me work through some gender stuff

**Double:** Oh! Nice, we're happy for you.

**Cano\_P:** thank you <3

**Cano\_P:** still a lady, just also nonbinary

**Cano\_P:** just like I'm a lady that's also a plant

**Cano\_P:** I contain multitudes

**Double:** \(^▽^)/人(^▽^)/

**Cano\_P:** I like my many parts ^^

**Double:** So do we.

**Cano\_P:** ...do you mean you like MY two parts or YOUR two parts

**Double:** (¯^¯)ゞ

**Double:** Both!

**Double:** Though we are more than two.

**Cano\_P:** oh! I guess I just assumed

**Cano\_P:** because "Double"

**Double:** (Our name starts with a W.)

**Cano\_P:** ohhh

**Double:** But yes, all of us like all of you.

**Double:** Well, all of us except one. But she never likes anyone.

**Double:** ♥\(\_ω\_(ಠ\_ಠ)>

**Cano\_P:** ohh I see haha

**Cano\_P:** thank you, same <3

**Double:** That reminds us, we have a book for you next time we visit.

**Cano\_P:** a book? aww, you don't have to!

**Double:** We insist.



# Uprooted

"Don't sit on those feelings for too long."

As Canopy's thoughts drifted to Renée once again, Nell's words repeated in her mind. They had been repeating for weeks.

She still didn't know how to tell her.

Renée had been an ever-present part of Canopy's life ever since she'd moved to the city. Especially considering how many packages regularly made their way to the small apartment with the weird code lock. And now that she was more or less stuck in place, the plant girl had grown to depend on the postal worker's regular deliveries. Not to mention all the ways Renée had literally kept Canopy alive back in the rocky early days of her transformation.

To be fair, Double had also become a regular, if less frequent, visitor. They made it a point to help clean up and store away what was out of Canopy's reach—all the while staying well out of the way of the lamp up on the shelf. Which was probably for the best, considering how each answer they turned up about its origin invariably brought up more questions.

They also helped in other ways, such as leaving Canopy a copy of *A Palm In Your Hands: Caring For Tropical Trees*, which she had not started reading yet out of sheer embarrassment.

Canopy had tried to compensate Double for their help, to no avail; they insisted it was just part of being a good neighbor. She had, however, managed to pay them back in other ways, such as insisting they sleep over during a night of particularly bad weather. Canopy had figured the bed wasn't getting much use anyway, so why let it go to waste?

Her thoughts would drift every so often to that bedroom, and to whether or not she still felt any attachment to it. Sure, beds were comfy, but they had always been a roll of the dice: would she get up the next morning well-rested, or would she find out she'd slept wrong and have to deal with a mysterious ache the following day?

Maybe that wasn't a problem anymore, as that sort of soreness was now mostly relegated to times when Canopy wasn't hydrating herself properly. But how would she wrest that giant head of leaves onto a pillow? Where would her roots go—even if she could be freed from her current spot, would they just hang off the edge of the mattress awkwardly? Would she track dirt all over the place trying to get into bed in the first place?

Nah. She could just get a sheet or something to wrap herself in and get the same effect. Besides, going back to 'treemode' was such an

effective way to get quality sleep! Even if it did make things a bit fuzzy. Double had told her more than once that they'd needed to hit the buzzer multiple times—*BZZZZZZT!*—before she'd realize there was someone at the door. (Though she'd given them a key, they insisted on being let in, as if beholden to some vampire code of politeness.) Canopy wasn't sure why she had become such a heavy sleeper. Maybe it had to do with the late nights she'd been working recently, now that her art was in full swing again.

"Tsk tsk tsk. In bad shape again, huh?" a disapproving voice said in the back of her mind.

It wasn't like she could help it! She was drawing again. Commissions, yes, but also some new sketches. She wasn't sure where they would take her, but she was excited to find out. Maybe she'd finally make a new zine or mini-comic. Something to sell next time she tabled at a con.

But that was way, way off in the future. For now, she could just keep herself to cozy thoughts: basking in the warmth and light of her own personal sun, wrapping herself up in a soft duvet, and sleeping for as long as she wanted. Maybe she could make the bed thing work, somehow. Part of her wanted to try it at least once. Wouldn't it be nice? Being able to stand forever without effort was pretty amazing, but sinking into a soft mattress under a pile of covers had its advantages too. The reassuring weight of the blankets, the rows of cushioned springs cradling her, the wetness at her feet...

Wait! No, no, don't water yourself in bed! That's a bad idea!

Canopy gasped as she awoke, reaching out with a branch-turned-hand to tip the spilling water bottle back up.

The bottle, being held by a hand.

Renée's hand.

Oh no.

They both stared at each other, face to face, close enough to see the freckles on each other's nose.

"AAAAAAAH!"

"AAAAAAAHAH!"

Canopy let go of Renée's hand, bringing both of her leafy arms up to hide her face as she screamed—allowing the postal worker to take a quick step back, then another, as she stood up and bumped against the doorframe.

Oh no. She knew. She knew! Why hadn't the buzzer woken Canopy up?! Was she sleeping too soundly? Had she gotten too lost in her dreams? Well, it didn't matter now; it was too late. Canopy couldn't tear her eyes away from the postal worker, her heart and mind both racing. What should she say? What *could* she say?

Renée stared at the plant girl, still too stunned to speak.

Canopy's heart sank as it filled her entire body with the sound of a

relentless drum. She didn't want to be feared, least of all by Renée. But what else could she expect? She was a reality-defying mix of plant and person, some sort of ab—

"You're alive," Renée said as she smiled despite herself.

Wait. What?

"I, uh... Yeah," Canopy replied.

"I mean, of course you're alive, but..." Renée stepped closer, bending down on one knee as an open gesture of appeasement, but also seemingly so she could get a better look. "You're a person. *And* a tree."

"Y... Yeah?" Canopy had no idea what was going on anymore. Was Renée not afraid? Was she not angry at her, for pretending to be a regular old tree all this time?

But the postal worker's smile just grew bigger. "Oh my gosh," she said as she looked down at where Canopy grew out of the planter, then up at the leaves on her head. She raised the empty bottle of water, the rest of its contents having spilled during the brouhaha. "Did I do this?"

"Do... what?" the plant girl asked, now completely at a loss. What was going on?

"Okay, so... How to explain this," the postal worker said as she took off her cap and fanned herself with it. "I've been helping your uh... your roommate take care of you over the winter. Hah. Helping out a first-time gardener was fine by me, but I didn't expect to make their plant come to life!"

Suddenly, it dawned on Canopy. Renée *didn't* know. She thought Canopy was the plant. She figured her "roommate" was still out there somewhere! She hadn't made the connection!

"It's gonna be okay, though!" Renée said with a confident smile. "Don't you worry. We'll figure out how this happened and make sure you've got all you need." She shook her head, tugging at the collar of her shirt to give herself some much-needed ventilation in the balmy heat of the apartment. "Hah! I had a lot of hopes and dreams when I became a plant mom, but none as wild as this."

But Canopy couldn't smile back. She couldn't. She shouldn't go along with this. The part of her—the old part of her that wanted to just go with the flow, to feed Renée's misunderstanding, to let her believe that this was her doing—screamed in the back of her mind to just take the path of least resistance that had been served up to her on a silver platter. But she couldn't.

That's not who she was anymore.

The temptation was strong, so very strong, but she wouldn't snap. That's not what palm trees did. She would keep dragging herself forward kicking and screaming, because she had to; because she knew it was the path to growth.

Renée carefully put her hand forward. "Hi, by the way. I'm Renée."

Canopy took a deep breath, then reached out to shake her hand. "I know," she said quietly.

Renée raised an eyebrow. "You know?"

"Yeah," the plant girl said shakily. "I'm Can... Canopy. I live here. It's me."

The postal worker mouthed Canopy's words back to her as she furrowed her brow.

"It's me, Renée. I, uh... some weird stuff happened, and... I'm a plant girl."

Renée blinked. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She looked closer—looked at the way the tablet had been set up, the peripherals within reach, the opened boxes on the floor—and then everything fell into place. "Oh," she finally said, her initial elation replaced by utter surprise.

"Yeah."

"Canopy," Renée said.

"Y... yeah. I, uh... I think it fits better."

"Yeah. Yeah, I can see that." Renée said as she stepped back, still processing everything. "...It's cute."

The plant girl managed an awkward smile.

"Wait, but... you were a tree a minute ago. Did I—"

"I can change back and forth."

"Oh. Really."

"Yeah, it's uh... it's how I work now, I guess. I just... grow what I need, like arms."

Renée nodded absent-mindedly, looking down at the bright orange bean bag. "And legs?"

"Uhhh," Canopy said as she looked down at her midsection, where her humanoid torso shifted into the more rugged tree trunk via... some frilly leaves? The plant girl stared at the beginning of that skirt-like layer of wiggly leaves she'd talked about with Double. What had they called it? An inflorescence?

Renée raised her arms. "Sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"Yeah, no, I mean I... I'm still working on figuring out, uh... everything."

"I see," the postal worker said. The shock and surprise were finally fading from her face, but not to reveal Renée's previous look of confident elation. No, if Canopy had to put a word to it, the postal worker's expression almost felt like... disappointment.

The plant girl didn't know how to feel. Well, she felt *bad*, that was certain, but something in her chest was squeezing so tightly she couldn't parse the jumble of emotions. She couldn't bear to look Renée in the face, but she also couldn't look away. She would have loved to be what the lady of her dreams had wanted her to be, to meet those expectations,

to live in the reality that she had pieced together. But she couldn't. And every second she lingered on that face—that bittersweet look when you realize that something magical happened, but not because of you—felt like an eternity.

Renée opened her mouth to speak, only to be interrupted by a beeping at her waist. She pulled up her ever-present device, pressed a few buttons, and put it away again. "I'm gonna be late," she said as she carefully stepped back to the door. "Sorry."

Canopy could feel this moment slipping through her fingers. She wanted to believe there was a way to make things right, if she could just figure out the perfect thing to say. But if those words existed, she couldn't find them.

"You gonna be okay?" the postal worker asked, as she put her cap back on.

"Uh," the plant girl said, snapping out of her ruminations. "Yeah, uh... You brought me some water, and the power's on, so..."

"Oh yeah, the power... You remember the big outage? You were... that was you too, back then?"

Canopy died a little inside, all the times she willingly hid herself from Renée flashing before her eyes. "Yeah," she finally admitted. "I was... I was scared, I didn't want to—"

"No, yeah," Renée said, putting a hand on the doorknob. "I get it, I do. It's... a heck of a thing. You don't know how people will react."

"Please! Uh, please..." Canopy said, grasping at verbal straws to keep her guest from leaving.

"What?"

"Please." The plant girl took a deep breath. "Please don't tell anyone?"

Renée blinked, then nodded matter-of-factly. "Oh, I mean yeah, of course. I got your back."

That brought a small smile out of Canopy. "Thanks," she said. "Will uh, will you..." She took another shaky breath, unable to get the whole sentence out in one go. "Will you come back?"

Renée gave a small sigh, then nodded at the boxes surrounding the two of them. "I mean, it's my job."

Canopy sighed as well, though hers was tinged with relief. "Thanks," she said quietly. "Please take care."

"You too," Renée said as she left.

As soon as the door closed, Canopy burst into tears.

# Brace Yourself

The tightness deep inside Canopy's chest had overridden every other signal her body could transmit. She could hardly breathe, so she didn't; she couldn't get any artwork done, so she just stared at her screen, and let her social media feeds scroll by. There was nothing else in the world except Renée, and whether she hated Canopy or not.

The plant girl replayed their last interaction over and over and over in her mind. She read into every possible word, analyzed every gesture and physical cue. She couldn't call her, or text her, or get in touch with her in any way, shape or form, so in the meantime, this was all she could do.

She couldn't just leave things that way. She had to do something; she had to know if things were okay between them.

Sure, Renée had seemed a bit let down to find out the palm tree that miraculously came to life in front of her wasn't a result of her gardening skills, but that wasn't something she'd been looking forward to, was it? It was sudden. So even as disappointments go, it couldn't have been that bad. Maybe she just needed to let some time pass, and they'd be okay again. All she had to do was wait.

And order something on Lighthouse.

The waiting would be the hardest part. That is, if Canopy had been her old self. She was part plant now, and waiting a couple of days was much easier when you were a tree. Easier still when the fuzzy time spent as a person-sized palm tree filled your mind with dreams.

Some dreams were cozy, like an afternoon on the beach, or a lazy day on a certain windowsill. Others were a bit more lively, like the one where Renée released Canopy from the confines of her apartment and introduced her to the outside world; a world that could be friendly, and nice, and safe. She liked that particular dream a lot. And until she could live it, she'd keep dreaming it.

*BZZZZZZT!*

The upside of spending so much time resting meant that Canopy's sleep was light enough that she didn't miss the buzzer this time around. The two, or three, or four days had gone by in a flash.

She looked at the door with trepidation. Her heart, which had been dormant for a while now, was beating again—and fast. As much as she'd been anticipating this moment, she didn't quite know what she was going to say. She figured she'd play it by ear; so much depended on what Renée was going to say.

"Oh, hey," the latter said as she peeked in with one hand on the

door, the other around a box. "Package for ya." Her voice was the same, but something sounded different to the plant girl's ears.

"Hi!" Canopy said, a little too loud. "Uh, yeah! Thank you!"

Renée looked around, then stepped further into the lobby, leaning over beyond the door frame into the apartment proper. "I'll just put it here, if that's good? Within reach."

"Thank you. Yeah."

"Alright," Renée said with a small, but courteous smile. "You have a good day now."

"WAIT!" Canopy blurted out as the postal worker headed for the door.

Renée stopped, a bit taken aback. "What is it?" she asked with a hint of concern.

"Do you, uh," the plant girl began to say, not sure where she was going with this. Truthfully, she'd just wanted to keep Renée from leaving and hadn't thought that far ahead. "Are you... doing okay?" she finally asked, almost shrinking with embarrassment at how awkward she must have sounded.

"Uh, yeah," the postal worker replied with a quirked eyebrow. "I'm doing alright." She eyed the opened package of water bottles next to Canopy; one of several. "You've got everything you need, right?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. Thank you. Oh!" The plant girl practically jumped in place. There! That was something to talk about! "Right! Uh, thank you. Thank you for... for taking care of me all this time."

That got Renée to smile. "Of course, no problem. I garden a lot in my free time, so I'm glad my know-how was useful. I'm not gonna let a plant get hurt."

"Yeah!" Canopy said with a grin. "You mess with a tree, you mess with me!"

Renée's smile faded. "That's right," she said in a measured tone.

"...Y-yeah," the plant girl repeated, a bit confused. Why was she...?

"You heard me say that." Renée's eyes darted to and fro along an invisible line on the floor as her face ran the gamut of expressions from confusion to dawning realization to unsettling discomfort.

Canopy froze. All those times, Renée hadn't known she was talking to someone who could understand her; from her point of view, she was just talking to a tree. Canopy hadn't thought twice about it. She just really liked to hear Renée's voice. But now it was hard to see this as anything other than a breach of trust, even an accidental one. Maybe a lot of what Renée had said were things she was comfortable sharing with a plant, but not a person. Especially not the very person she was talking about. "I'm... I'm sorry," Canopy said, stumbling over her words. "I-I didn't mean to..."

"Nah, it's fine," Renée said, heading for the door. "I gotta get back

to work. Take care, alright?"

Canopy opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't get any words out before the door closed. Her face instantly scrunched up as she broke down into loud sobbing.

She'd messed it up. She'd messed it all up! Now it was even *worse*! What was she going to do? Renée hated her for sure now. She couldn't... She had to...

She had to apologize. She had to make things right.

Canopy quickly loaded up the Lighthouse app and ordered some more supplies, anything, just to get a box delivered to her apartment soon. In a few clicks, it was done. She glanced at the group chat and the pile of notifications that had accumulated over the past few days. Her friends were probably starting to wonder why she'd been so quiet.

She closed the window. She didn't want to think about anything else right now. Nothing mattered other than this giant chasm that had been torn open between herself and Renée. She had to bridge the gap, somehow. Get things back to the way they were before, back when Renée was there for her, and cared for her, and... Gosh, her smile. Canopy could still see her smile, as painful as it was to even contemplate right now. She had to get it back. Until then, she wasn't sure how she'd be able to function.

So she didn't.

Canopy retreated back within the comfortable numbness of her bark and leaves, waiting for the buzzer. For however long it would take.

*BZZZZZZT!*

She didn't have to wait long. Or at least, it didn't feel like much time had passed when she sprang awake, reflexively turning toward the door.

Renée peeked in politely. "Hey," she said as she stepped forward to drop off another case of water bottles.

"Hey," Canopy said, doing her best to focus on Renée's face, trying to glean as much information as possible from her expression. But the lighting wasn't great, and the postal worker was avoiding eye contact. At least, that's what it looked like.

Before another word could be said, Renée gave a quick wave and closed the door on her way out.

Canopy blinked. No. No, that wasn't fair! She still didn't have an answer. She couldn't just leave all these feelings in the air like that.

She turned to her computer again. Loaded up the Lighthouse app. A few clicks here, and a deep sleep there.

*BZZZZZZT!*

"Hi," Renée said as she added to the stack. "Really stocking up, huh?"

Canopy's heart swelled at this welcome bit of small talk. "Yeah!" she said. "Listen, I, uh, I know this has been a bit weird, but..." She took a



deep breath, images of past dreams flooding her mind. "I really want to get to know you better. The *real* you, you know?"

Renée stepped back from the boxes and stood there for a bit, her face a mix of emotions that Canopy wasn't quite able to parse. Finally, she cracked a smile, but there was little joy in it. "Sorry," she said as she stepped back toward the door. "It's just... a really busy day today. Take care, yeah?"

"Y... yeah."

And with that, she was gone.

Canopy stared at the darkened lobby, then at the stack of boxes next to her. Her heart was beating loudly again. But there was little joy in that either.

She reached for her tablet.

*BZZZZZZT!*

A quick dropoff, in and out with a simple nod.

*BZZZZZZT!*

Renée was on the phone that time, talking about a report card.

*BZZZZZZT!*

"I'm sorry!" Canopy blurted out, holding back the tears. She didn't know what to say anymore. She didn't know what to do. "I just... I care about you a lot, you know? I'm... I'm here, I made it, thanks to you."

"No," Renée said, shaking her head.

Canopy looked up. "Wh... what?"

"Don't say that."

"But..." the plant girl said, not prepared for this conversation to go that way. "But it's true."

"No it's not," Renée said as she crossed her arms. "Don't put yourself down like that. This is just my day job. If it hadn't been me, it would've been someone else. You ordered everything, you left the messages, you made it all happen, right?"

Canopy stared back, stunned. She nodded.

"Maybe I saved you some time, but that's all. You put in the work. So give yourself credit, alright?"

The plant girl opened her mouth to speak, but words were hard. "I... I really am grateful for your help! You took good care of me."

Renée knelt down and leaned in a tiny bit, giving the conversation a kinder tone, like that of a parent talking to a child. "I'm glad. That's what any good neighbor would've done. But you can take care of yourself now. Right?"

Canopy nodded.

"So please do that," Renée said as she stood back up. "Take care of yourself. Alright?"

"...Alright."

"Good," the postal worker said with a gentle smile as she stepped

back into the lobby. "I'll leave you to it."

And with that, Renée closed the door. Canopy heard, as much as felt, her footsteps go down the stairs, followed by the creak of the front door, and the resounding finality of it closing shut.

It took her a while to face the boxes and boxes of supplies, and even longer to actually reach for a water bottle.

And even longer still to open it.

**Strawberryjan:** OH MY GOSH YOU'RE BACK!  
**NellDotWham:** oh thank goodness <3  
**vern\_notice:** you gotta stop doing that  
**Cano\_P:** sorry  
**Double:** (¬¬)  
**Double:** Did you turn into a different species again?  
**Cano\_P:** asdjklassdkjaslf  
**Cano\_P:** NO  
**NellDotWham:** oh good haha  
**Cano\_P:** it's just  
**Strawberryjan:** You still there, kiddo?  
**Cano\_P:** yeah  
**Cano\_P:** it's just been hard  
**NellDotWham:** <3  
**Strawberryjan:** That's fair, there are days like that.  
**Double:** Sometimes more.  
**Strawberryjan:** We just get worried when you disappear  
for weeks at a time. Are you sure you're okay?  
**Cano\_P:** yeah  
**Cano\_P:** this shouldn't happen again  
**Double:** You said that the last three times as well.  
**Cano\_P:** sorry  
**Cano\_P:** I'm working on it  
**vern\_notice:** you know what to do when life's rude?  
**vern\_notice:** be rude right back!!  
**Strawberryjan:** The best revenge is living well.  
**vern\_notice:** yeah live well  
**vern\_notice:** out of SPITE  
**NellDotWham:** haha yeah!  
**Cano\_P:** thanks  
**Strawberryjan:** We're here for you, kiddo!  
**Double:** (~~)ゞ(¯ω¯)  
**NellDotWham:** <3  
**vern\_notice:** just give it time  
**vern\_notice:** spring's gonna come kick winter's butt!

# Transplant Shock

Canopy looked outside, drawing the curtains open just a little more. The sun was so bright she could almost feel the heat emanating from the neighboring building's wall from where she was standing. Or sitting. Or whatever you wanted to call it when a tree that was also a person decided to lean back and relax a bit. She put the plastic grabby-claw back up against her desk and returned to her work.

It had been difficult to get anything done for a while now, ever since...

Canopy sighed. She didn't like to think about her last big conversation with Renée, much less the ones that led up to it. Trying to fill the days with art had worked to some extent, but she had her limits, even if they weren't exactly physical ones now. She could draw for hours on end without her wrists hurting, but all it took was a single distraction for her heart to start aching about how badly she'd screwed things up with the lady she liked.

She buried her face in her hands. Gosh, she was such a mess.

Renée had dropped by again, every now and then; she was still delivering mail, along with the occasional Lighthouse order. Even a stack of water bottles didn't last very long when you were a growing tree. And thankfully, interactions between the plant girl and the postal worker had been mostly friendly and civil. But the awkwardness was still there. At least Canopy had what she needed: safety, security, and the resources to keep growing.

She looked up at the ceiling, breathing a sigh of relief that it had stopped getting closer. She wasn't sure if it had been a conscious choice or a natural limitation, but her height had finally peaked. It was a bit tricky to measure considering just how large Canopy's... canopy was, but by any measure she was a tall girl.

And she was fine with that.

It had been strangely affirming to be surrounded by friends who kept flooding her with worried questions and be able to confirm time and again that yes, she was fine with all of it. This was nice. She could take a break and be a tree whenever she wanted, she never really got tired, and her daily existence had become a treasure trove of tiny sensory novelties she'd never been privy to before.

It had, however, gotten to be a little sheltered.

She looked down, past the fuzzy skirt of wiggling leaves around her waist, to the stretched and distraught shell of her bright orange bean bag planter. It was definitely on its last legs now, its opening stretched

almost to the very edge of the fabric, having been filled to the brim with various growth mediums in addition to Canopy's growing mass of roots. She still—still!—didn't quite know how she was so stable in her position. She could bend and sway without fear of tipping over, which she really doubted the bean bag was able to pull off by itself. The more she thought about it, however, the more she dreaded finding out just what exactly she was latching onto.

But these introspective outbursts only ever lasted a moment. The second she considered that there was a world outside these walls, it was all over. She didn't want to risk it—getting seen by other people, being at the mercy of passers-by, opening herself up to so many dangers she couldn't even begin to imagine. It just wasn't worth it. She wasn't going to outgrow this place anyway. Why try to leave it?

Canopy sighed. She did really miss the sun, though. Not that her lamp wasn't doing its job; to the contrary, it had saved her life. But part of her longed for the real thing. And at this point, she wasn't sure how she'd ever be able to get it. At least not in a way that felt safe.

So she did what she always did when faced with an impossible situation: she went the heck to sleep.

Back to being a tree. Back to the beach, and its perpetual sunny breeze. Back to the windowsill, and the quiet city below. Back to the door opening, and the strong—

*BZZZZZZT!*

Canopy jolted awake. What? She wasn't expecting guests. She hadn't even ordered anything! Her last delivery had been just a couple days ago, and she had plenty of supplies. She looked out the window, at the shadows cast by the early morning sun. What on earth?

A great cacophony of thumps and thuds made its way up the stairs. Then down. Then back up again. What was going on? She turned toward the lobby once the sound of footsteps had ceded to the familiar tiny taps of fingers on the keypad. She saw the door open. She saw someone step inside.

It was Renée.

"Good morning!" the postal worker said, wearing a running jacket and some shorts. She carefully maneuvered a large half-barrel planter through the door behind her, rolling it past the lobby and just inside the living room. "Time for an upgrade."

"Uh," Canopy replied, having trouble processing what was happening over the sudden drum beat of her heart. "Wait. I didn't order this. Are you sure this is for here? And... you're really early?" It suddenly hit her that Renée was out of uniform. "And and... are you even working? What's going on?"

"It's a gift," Renée said as she stepped back into the hallway, returning with a bag of peat moss. "And I have the day off."

Canopy mouthed the words that had just been spoken. "Wait, a gift? From who?" she asked, wide-eyed and bewildered.

"Good morning," Double said as they carried in a bag of potting soil.

Canopy's eyes went wide. "You..." She looked from one to the other and back. "You two know each other?"

Renée nodded. "Yeah, I let 'em in last winter to get your things up and running after the power came back. They said they were a friend." She stopped in her tracks as she brought in a container of leaf mold. She gave Canopy a knowing look. "Right, of course, you were there the whole time."

"You... you talked your way in?!"

"We're very convincing," Double replied as they put the bag down to go open the curtains a bit more. They turned around. "At any rate. It's a beautiful day outside, and you need some actual sun. You also need a planter that's not about to disintegrate. Renée will help with one, while we help with the other. Simple and straightforward, no?"

"See the sun?" Canopy asked, her gaze going from one person to the other. "Like... outside?"

"That's right," Renée said. "I know a park not too far from here that's being prepped for some new trees, so it won't mind a visitor. And at this hour, there's no one around. I can have you there and back in a jiffy while Double takes care of things in here."

Canopy looked out the window, filled with a deeply uncomfortable mix of worry and anticipation. She couldn't find the words. Sure, seeing the sun sounded nice; she'd dreamed about it since, well... since this whole thing started. And the thought of finally replacing her poor bean bag with something actually intended for her felt like a dream come true. But that's all that was, a dream! What if someone saw her? What would people think? Would she really survive one moment in the outside world?

"What if we just, like... put me on the couch or something? I don't *have* to go outside, right?"

"We need room to clean, to set everything up, and we also need to air out the place," Double said as they cleared out some boxes to make room. "We know it's scary outside, but you'll be in good hands." They stopped in front of Canopy for a moment, giving her leaves a concerned look. "Please get some sun."

Renée rolled her shoulders and gave her neck muscles a quick stretch, which made the plant girl forget what she was about to say.

Canopy regained her wits a moment later. "Renée, you're... really okay with doing this? I thought you said..."

Renée raised her hands. "Your friend is taking care of you this time, not me. I'm just a contractor here. Besides, I'm getting a pretty good deal out of this."

"We're paying her for her time and expertise," Double said as they came back from opening some windows.

"And?" Renée said with a smile.

"And," Double added with a sigh, "once this is done, we'll share with her everything we know about the whole..." They gestured vaguely around them. "Turning into a tree thing."

"Heck yeah."

"We're... *pretty* sure what caused all this," Double said as they kneeled on the couch to open the back window a tiny bit. "Although the circumstances surrounding the event may have tipped the scales. The bean bag may have just been a convenient medium."

Canopy tilted her head. "Wait... You want to know how to turn into a plant?"

"Me? Hah! Nah, I'm good." Renée leaned a little bit closer, her voice taking on a softer tone. "Listen, Canopy... It's not every day you come across an honest-to-goodness miracle, let alone one in a field you're passionate about. Of course I wanna know more about it! Even if it's just for personal enlightenment. I mean, who wouldn't?"

"I guess I can understand that," Canopy said, nodding her head slowly. "You're passionate about gardening? I thought that was just a hobby."

"Delivering packages is important, but it's not exactly my calling. I've been working on branching out for a while," Renée said with a grin. She gave the room one more look and exhaled slowly, her wistful expression slowly shifting into one of determination. Then she put her hands on her hips. "So. Are we doing this?"

Canopy glanced outside one more time. Maybe she was going to be okay. Maybe this could work. A part of her certainly wanted it to. She looked at Double, who had gotten some work gloves out of their backpack and was in the process of slipping them onto the other gloves they were already wearing. "You think it's gonna be safe?"

Double nodded. "Of course. You somehow grew to this size in barely humid bean bag filler—"

"All natural!" Canopy interjected.

"—barely humid *all natural* bean bag filler, yes. You only started watering yourself after a few weeks. Your personal care routine has been nothing short of shocking, and yet you're still mostly healthy! That's very impressive, Canopy."

"It sounds kinda bad when you put it that way."

"It means you're hardy," Renée said as she stepped in, "probably because of your person half. You should handle a transplant like a pro, I'm not worried. And given the shape you're in now, with some proper care and nutrients you should *really* blossom."

The plant girl swallowed, then nodded. "Okay."

"Okay," Renée said, looking down at the bright orange bean bag. "This thing's on its last legs. We might need to hold it down in case it gets snagged on the roots or falls apart."

"We got it," Double said as they circled around to keep an eye on the makeshift planter.

Renée nodded, kneeling in close to Canopy's side in a familiar pose. Was it the one from her dreams, when Renée would sweep her off her feet? Was it the one from their fateful and awkward last big talk, when Renée gently but firmly made it clear how she felt? It was hard to tell which one it was. Maybe it was both.

Whichever it was, Canopy couldn't bear to look at Renée's face to make sure. "Alright," the postal worker finally said. "Hold on to me, then. Let's see if this planter will let you go."

Canopy nodded, reaching up to grab ahold of Renée as the latter slipped one arm around her back and another behind the lowest part of her trunk. Canopy's breath caught in her throat as she leaned in, holding on as best she could. Renée bent down a bit lower, affirmed her grip on the plant girl, and began to gently lift the both of them up.

It was not, in fact, like taking off a pair of boots; Canopy's dreams had lied. She could feel the dirt sift through her roots, but she was holding on tight. What was going on? Couldn't Renée just lift her up and out of the planter? Was she that heavy?

Renée let the plant girl back down, exhaling slowly. "Good gosh, are you bolted to the floor?"

"I... I don't know," Canopy said as she looked back down. She wiggled her roots, making the soil ripple over them. It felt like she could move around in there pretty freely; almost like an earth mermaid. So what was the holdup? Was she stuck? "Can you try again?" she asked.

So Renée tried again. And again. And despite Canopy redoubling her grip on the gardener's shoulders, there was no getting her out of there. The bright orange bean bag was holding on for dear life. As was the dirt. And the floor underneath. And why not the walls and ceiling too, she thought? The whole apartment! It didn't want to let her go!

...Well.

Maybe it wasn't the *floor* that was holding on. Maybe—

"Canopy," Double said as they looked down at the makeshift planter while Renée caught her breath.

"What?" the plant girl asked, lost in thought.

"Do you trust us?"

"Of course I do!"

Double nodded. Then lifted their head and made eye contact. "Do you *want* to leave?"

Canopy stared back. Double had figured it out too. The plant girl looked over the apartment again. This may have been her home for just



a few years, but her plant half had lived here her entire life. No wonder this was hard. Double and Renée had explained to her the benefits, the reason why they were doing all this today. But they couldn't *make* her leave. She had to want to leave.

Every part of her had to want to leave.

It would be easy to stay, for sure. She had found something cozy that worked for her. Uncomfortable at times, sure, but cozy. This was all too familiar. She wanted to go out and see the sun, she wanted to find surer footing, but it meant taking a risk! It meant giving up something important to her!

At least, that's how her plant half saw it. She was young, after all; just a few months old. No wonder she was a mess. But she was doing her best. And deep inside, Canopy knew she wanted help. She wanted to grow. She just needed to push herself forward.

Kicking and screaming, if she had to.

Canopy closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Then another, and another. She focused on what she wanted; on what would make her happy. She thought about how much better her life could be. She was scared, of course, but she was also there to reassure herself. To take care of herself, in a way. The thing everyone kept reminding her to do.

She chuckled.

"What is it?" Double asked.

Canopy took another deep breath, then opened her eyes. "I'm ready," she said. "Let's try this one more time, please."

They all got into position again: Double keeping an eye on the planter, Renée getting ready to lift. Canopy did her part as well; she had a simple job, but it was an important one.

She let go.

And with a loud cacophony of ripping and tearing and all sorts of noises that Canopy absolutely did not want to know the origin of, Renée finally stood up to her full height, bringing the plant girl along with her in a princess carry. It was done! She was up!

She was free.

Renée took a step back as a waterfall of dirt covered the floor in front of Canopy's computer. The plant girl couldn't stop wiggling her roots, the feeling of fresh air on them still so new and novel to her. She didn't dare to look, out of a mix of fear and embarrassment. She hoped her roots were okay. She could feel them, and she could move them, so they were probably okay, right? But still, she couldn't bring herself to look.

"Am I okay?" she finally asked, her face buried in Renée's shoulder.

"How... How on earth did you do that?" the postal worker asked as she shifted position to better support the plant girl in her arms.

"Do what?"

"Your roots are *clean*. You shed almost all the dirt! That's, uh... not like any root ball I've ever seen. It's something else, I can't even describe it."

"Is... is that good?"

"That's amazing. Made kind of a mess, though."

"Oh?" Canopy replied, daring to sneak a peek.

The living room was a *disaster*. It looked as if a bright orange bomb full of dirt had exploded in the middle of her apartment. Thankfully, her computer seemed to have been spared; the bigger victim was the floor around and... under the bean bag?

"Is... is the floor okay?" she asked.

Renée leaned to the side a bit to get a better look. She let out a low whistle. "Wow, you were in there *deep*. Are those roots made of iron? It looks like you ate the floorboards for breakfast!"

"Oh no! Am I gonna have to ask for repairs? How am I gonna explain this?"

Double looked at the hole, walked around to the door, rolled the barrel planter over, and tipped it over the hole with a *THUMP*.

"Oh," Canopy said. "I guess that works for now."

Thank goodness her former landlord was just a city-appointed superintendent now. No matter how awkward the eventual conversation about fixing the floor would be, she had nothing to fear. This was her home, after all. She could stay here as long as she wanted.

Right now, though, she was ready to leave.

"Am I, uh, okay?" Canopy asked, settling in a little better. "To go out, I mean."

Double gave her a thumbs-up, quickly followed by a shoo-shoo gesture as they began setting up the new planter.

"Yep, I've got you," Renée said. "You're lighter than a lot of trees I've known."

Canopy chuckled awkwardly. "Okay then, uh... Wow." She took a breath to settle her nerves. "I guess I'm ready."

"Alright then," Renée said, pivoting toward the door and heading into the lobby. "Time to make like a you and leave."

**Double:** All went well and she's outside.

**Double:** ☀️ (●^●❄️)

**Strawberryjan:** Good! I'm glad kiddo's finally getting some sun.

**NellDotWham:** careful with the lamp! unless you wanna turn into a plant too

**Double:** We're taking precautions with the greenhouse equipment.

**Strawberryjan:** I still can't believe she thought that thing was a therapy lamp.

**vern\_notice:** eh I believe it

**vern\_notice:** lamps are lamps

**Strawberryjan:** The ones for therapy look completely different! And they don't come from strange manufacturers.

**NellDotWham:** hmmm

**NellDotWham:** do you think they make other kinds of lamps?

**Strawberryjan:** Wait what do you mean?

**vern\_notice:** oh man what if you get another cursed one?

**NellDotWham:** exactly!!

**Strawberryjan:** NO

**NellDotWham:** I'd buy a doggo lamp in a heartbeat

**Strawberryjan:** I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE STILL JOKING ABOUT THIS

**NellDotWham:** c'mon! wouldn't you want a fox lamp?

**NellDotWham:** take a two-month nap, become a fox girl!

**Strawberryjan:** That w

**Strawberryjan:** That wouldn't work. What are the chances?

**Double:** Canopy could buy it. With her luck, it'll happen.

**Strawberryjan:** f;awoiejf;o

# Make Like a Tree

As Renée carried her into the hall and down the stairs, Canopy realized that she hadn't seen the outside of her apartment in a very long time. It was more cramped than she remembered, especially as she was now. She held onto Renée's shoulders, tucking her roots in as best she could—it was hard to get a good look at them in the position she was in, so she wasn't quite sure how close they were to scraping across the wall. She turned her gaze to the bottom of the stairs, and to the light streaming through the front door's window pane.

This moment wasn't quite as she'd imagined it.

She settled into Renée's arms, leaning her head back with a quiet sigh. Here she was, being carried like a princess by the strong delivery lady she'd grown so attached to, but... nothing had turned out the way she'd wanted. This moment was nice, but the day itself was bittersweet. The awkwardness was still there. And while Canopy had no doubt that Renée held good intentions toward her, they were those of a gardener, or a neighbor.

Not the relationship she'd wanted, but the one she got. It would have to be enough.

By the time she snapped back to reality, Canopy noticed that the two of them were in a part of town she'd never seen before. Overhanging trees and cozy fences and colorful murals as far as the eye could see—where was this? Had she spaced out for that long?

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Just a block away," Renée answered. "Community garden's this way."

"One block?!" Canopy said, rising up slightly to get a better look around. "But it's so... nice! And green! This is one block from my place? How—wait did you say garden?"

The postal worker laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna put you in next to the lettuce. We're just gonna grab a shovel on the way to the park."

"Oh," the plant girl said as she settled in again. "Phew."

"You really lived here all these years without going more than one block?"

"I did! I've walked around plenty of times, just... not here. Where is this?"

"The alley behind your building. Cuts right across the block."

"Oh," Canopy said, looking up at the trees cradling either side of the cobblestone path. "I thought the alleys were scary."



"I mean, a couple of them can look a little rugged, but you can't judge a city by one alley. Most of them are really nice." Renée looked both ways, then crossed the street into another alley. "And more importantly for you, out of sight. See? Barely anyone. If someone asks, you can say you're wearing a costume. In this city, that's what folks will assume anyway."

Canopy nodded. That was good to know. She... hadn't exactly given much thought to getting around outside, given her current condition. But in just a few minutes, her world had gotten much bigger. Maybe things would work out.

Renée grabbed a collapsible shovel as the two of them passed a small vegetable garden, attaching the tool to a carabiner on her belt. In just a few more twists and turns through back alleys, they emerged into one of the city's many neighborhood parks. It was, as could be expected this early in the day, completely deserted.

"Here, I'll set you down," Renée said as she maneuvered over to a bench. "I think you can lie down flat right here so you don't hurt your fronds, let's see what's comfy for you."

Canopy carefully shifted her position, grabbing ahold of the wooden backrest of the bench as the postal worker eased her down onto the seat. Before she could wonder if she was even able to sit in her present form, she settled onto the bench upright, her trunk bending into the seat's curves quite comfortably. Huh. One more question answered. Maybe the whole sleeping-in-her-own-bed thing could actually work.

"Well now you're just showing off," Renée said as she snapped the shovel out. "Didn't have to break out the burlap and ropes for the roots, didn't have to find a bench long enough for you to lie down... Next thing you know you'll be walking around!" She shook her head as she surveyed the park one more time. "Alright, I'll go find you a spot where you can dig your roots in for a minute. They've been prepping this place for a new batch so most of the work is already done."

"Wait, like... plant myself?"

"Something like that. You'll want to settle in some nice soil for a bit so you can stand on your own. I'll be right back." And with that, she turned around and started sizing up the holes city workers had already dug in preparation for the new trees.

Canopy looked down at her roots for the first time now that she had a proper point of view. What she was, was *fascinating*. It looked like one of those children's toys: the small rubber balls made entirely of thick filaments flaring out from the center. Calling it a 'root ball' was surprisingly spot-on. She gave her roots a wiggle, watching as they shifted and swayed like a forest of bare trees in the wind. It was, thankfully, not as creepy as she feared it would be. It was just a part of her! One foot, many toes. Sort of.

In a fit of independence, she pushed down into the grass, wondering if that would be enough to—

And before she knew it, Canopy was standing.

"Whoa," she said out loud, marveling at just how much grip she could exert on the ground. This was great. This *felt* great! She shifted and drummed her roots along the same direction, almost purely on instinct, and managed a bit of a slow shuffle. She was moving. She was moving on her own!

A giant grin on her face, Canopy shuffled around the park, managing a surprisingly good speed. About as fast as she'd go on her quiet walks to and from home, she reckoned—but without the aches or the worry of tripping over a curb or an uneven step, thanks to how flexible her root ball was. She lazily explored the park, getting a feel for this new means of locomotion as she slowly made her way to a spot of open sun. It was like trying out a new brush: every new motion a source of elation.

How to get around had been one of her last remaining big worries when it came to her current condition, but now it was the furthest thing from her mind. All it took were a few moments of shuffling around a lonely park to feel good about herself all over again. She was positively euphoric.

As soon as she reached the spot where the neighboring buildings' shadows couldn't reach, as soon as the sun—the actual, capital-S Sun—was beaming down on her, she knew she was home. It was second nature: she dug herself in, reached up toward the light, and basked in all the warmth and heat she could ever need.

It was heaven.

Canopy lost all track of time. She didn't know if hours had passed, or mere minutes, and wasn't too concerned either way. The world could wait; she was on a date with the sun.

"Couldn't wait, huh?" Renée said as she walked over, the sound of metal sliding against metal as she folded the shovel back in on itself. "Didn't even need my help after all, you just dug right in. How'd you do that?"

Canopy opened her eyes again, gently lifting her head out of the tree she'd slipped back into. "Hey," she said with a goofy grin. "This is nice."

"I bet it is," Renée said, sitting down on the grass. "Well, this saves me some work."

"Mm," Canopy replied, slowly shifting back into a person, from her leafy fingers down to her... well, midsection. That was about as far as she went. And right now that was all she needed.

"Did you make yourself a crop top?" the postal worker asked, looking up with smirking disbelief.

The plant girl grinned. "Yeah," she giggled, looking down at the large

overlapping leaves growing from her waist to just below her neck. "I've been, uh... you know, growing some more, so... this felt appropriate, haha." She looked away, trying to hide her freckled blush in the shade. "I tried to put on a t-shirt like, once, and that was a bad idea."

Renée laughed. "Yeah, I get that." She looked out onto the park. "You know, there's a lot of shirts you can just tie in the back, right?"

"...Yeah?"

"Yeah! You can also get these clips that let you cut open a regular t-shirt and make it a behind-the-back-fasten deal."

"Oh, that sounds neat. I won't have to give away all my t-shirts."

"I mean, you could still do that. It's spring cleaning time, after all. A good opportunity to let go of some things."

Canopy looked out onto the tiny park, following Renée's gaze. Basking in the light. Breathing in the spring air. Feeling the slight breeze roll across her every leaf. Thinking about where she was now, and where she thought she'd be. Her gaze returned to Renée, who was still looking out at the grass that shimmered in the morning sun.

A good opportunity indeed.

Renée looked at her phone. "We should get you back."

"Actually," Canopy said, looking out onto the park again, "you should go on ahead. I wanna stay here for a bit."

Renée looked up. "You sure?"

"Yeah! I'll be okay. You showed me the way; I can make it back on my own." The plant girl smiled with as much confidence as she could muster. "I can take care of myself."

Renée gave Canopy a long look. Then she chuckled. "Aren't you full of surprises today. Well, I appreciate your confidence, but as your gardener for today I think it's best if you stay off the asphalt. We want those roots in tip-top shape when you get home to your new planter."

The plant girl frowned. "But I thought—"

"It's great that you can take care of yourself. But that also means pacing yourself, alright?"

"...That's fair." Canopy looked back to the spot on the other side of the park, where they'd both arrived from the alley. "I can walk on the grassy bits, at least."

Renée shook her head and laughed. "You can walk on the grassy bits. But let me handle the sidewalks and the street crossings. Deal?"

Canopy smiled. "Deal."

"Alright," Renée said as she got to her feet. "Let's get you home."



# Next Year

"Is that the latest *Life in Furgatory*?"

"It sure is!" Janice replied with a smile, motioning to the book prominently on display. "I also have some back issues with me here."

"Oh nice!" the customer said, removing their large helmet in the likeness of a cartoon cat. They leaned in for a closer look. "You have volume 5! Heck yeah, I've been missing that one! I'll take these two, please."

"Right away!" the veteran cartoonist said, signing them with a practiced flourish.

While they waited, the customer looked over to the other half of the table. "Oh, what's this?"

"It's a comic about a giant lady in a castle just outside town who turns would-be robbers into plants on her windowsill," said the girl behind the table. She grinned. "It's more wholesome than it sounds."

"Whoa," the customer said. Then they looked up at her. "WHOA! Holy crap, that costume!"

Canopy swayed from side to side in her seat, making the leaves on her head swish lazily along with the motion. "Thank you!" she said, beaming.

"That's incredible! Nice hair!"

"Thanks! I grew it myself!"

The customer broke out in laughter, then pointed at a comic. "I'll take one of those too, please!"

"Right away!"

A moment later, the happy customer walked away with their purchases as the tablemates sorted out their communal money pouch. Once the two of them were done, Canopy happily leaned back in her seat, wiggling her roots under the table. Feeling the dirt run over and around them. She looked across the artist's section of FurCAF: dozens and dozens of tables in makeshift alleys, set up in one of the biggest parks in the city.

Before, she liked this convention; now, she loved it. She could dig into the ground and bask in the summer sun and everyone automatically assumed she was in costume and didn't raise a fuss. It felt like home. She didn't even technically need the chair her trunk was curled on top of, but she figured she should keep up appearances.

Janice absent-mindedly disentangled a small knot in her long brown hair as she looked over the crowd. "I've missed this, kiddo."

"Me too," Canopy said, stretching her arms. Carefully, so they

wouldn't reflexively turn back into branches in the abundant sunlight. There'd be plenty of time for that later during her breaks.

"I'm glad we could make this work," Janice said, reaching for her smoothie. "Cheers!" She took a big sip—then her face suddenly scrunched up in disgust. "BLEHHH! Oh no is this yours??"

Canopy quickled turned her head, wincing in sympathy. "Oh no! Yes, that's mine, give it here!"

"What on earth are you drinking, kiddo? Eugh, it was like sucking on a lawnmower!" Janice quickly reached for the correct bottle, cleansing her palate with some cold fruit juice. "Next time I'm getting strawberry so we can tell them apart. Goodness!"

Canopy could only chuckle as she put her drink on the other side of the table, next to her bowl of berries, out of Janice's reach. "I'm still working on the whole drinking-from-the-mouth thing! This really helps on warm days when I'm outside, though."

"Haha! Are you okay, Janice?"

The plant girl instantly perked up at the sound of that voice. "NELL!" she shouted, practically bouncing in place.

"Canopy!" Nell said, arms wide open. "Oh my gosh, you look amazing!"

"Aww thank you!" the plant girl said as she got up—not exactly standing up so much as straightening her trunk from its curled 'sitting' position—and leaned over for a hug. "Aaaaa it's been so long!"

"I know! Double shouldn't be too long, we walked by an artist who does illustrated taxonomy so they said to go on without them." Nell stopped to catch her breath. "I love your shirt."

Canopy grinned. "Thank you! I mean, it says '100% Plant'—I couldn't *not* get it."

The blonde-haired friend ran her fingers over her fresh side cut as she eyed the products on the table. "Gosh, you've been busy! I didn't know you'd have so many prints." She spotted the prominent bowl of red berries. "Is that for sale or for snacking?"

Canopy protectively slid the bowl closer to her, holding it against her inflorescence skirt—which was currently devoid of any flowers. Or fruits.

The freckles on Canopy's face turned red. "Uhhh... no, these are for a... friend."

Nell quirked an eyebrow, looking at Canopy, then at the berries, then back at her. Then her eyes went wide. "Wait, ARE THOSE Y—"

"They're!!" Canopy yelled, waving her free hand at Nell. "For COOKING! It's for a friend! He's a pastry chef! It's for a... project! Thing!!"

They both stared at each other for a moment. Then, realizing there had been a peculiar silence, they turned to the other half of the table. Janice stood quietly, looking back at them, with the world's biggest icky-face.

Nell and Canopy both burst into laughter.

"No!!!" the plant girl said, nearly in tears. "Listen, he's... he just likes rare fruit! He's fine with it! He's gonna, like, make a pie or something! And besides, I took so long to finish his shark girl pic, I wanted to help him out."

Janice blanched. "You're going to EAT pie made from y—"

"No I'm not gonna eat it!" Canopy said, arms flailing. "Ew! Eww no! HE'S gonna eat it! Or sell it, or whatever he does with food after he records his cooking show! I don't care!"

Nell raised a hand to her chin, pondering. "Wait. Why is it only weird if *you* eat it?"

Canopy stopped mid-motion, at a bit of a loss. "Well. Uh... it's like..."

"Eat what?" asked a diminutive figure with purple demon horns and a pink-cheeked fabric mask, walking up to the table with an open book on fauna.

"OH THANK GOODNESS Double! Hi!!" Canopy said, sitting back down in her chair, fanning herself with a hand, her leafy fingers splayed out for maximum air displacement. "Perfect timing!"

Double looked from one person to the other. "Everything good?"

"Yeah, we're good!" Nell said, shaking her head as she smiled. "We're just being silly. Found something you liked?"

Double nodded.

"Nice! I still need to do another round. Good thing your booth is on the outside edge like this, you've got plenty of space."

"Yeah," Janice said, pointing behind her. "Kiddo's been walking off to take tree-breaks when it gets quiet. No one seems to notice, either. It's the darndest thing."

"Aw, that's great," Nell said, checking out Janice's new book.

"Nice doggo ears, by the way. Golden retriever?"

"You know it!" Nell answered with a grin, reaching up to flick one of the ears on the headband she was wearing.

Janice smiled, then instantly shifted into exhibitor mode as another customer walked up to the table, this one dressed head to toe in a black and orange cartoon canine suit. "Hi there!" the veteran artist said. "That's a very nice suit!"

"Thanks!" the customer replied, striking a pose.

"Is it a fox?"

"Maned wolf," Double said, still reading their book. "*Chrysocyon*, the golden dog."

Everyone turned to look at the demon-horned artist.

Then Vernon took off his suit's helmet. "Dang it Double, you could've let me have this for like, *more* than a second."

"Hello, Vern," Double said, probably smiling under their mask.

Vernon could only shake his head and laugh, running his hand

through his dark curls to loosen them up a bit now that they were free. "Hey," he replied, tucking the cartoon wolf head under his arm. "How's the con been for y'all?"

Nell was still in a bit of disbelief. "Vern, when did you get a whole hecking fursuit?"

"What?" he said, straight-faced. "There was a sale."

Everyone was silent.

Then he burst out laughing. "Aaaaa, you got me! I commissioned it a while back. Just got it yesterday. I'm gonna do the reveal on my post-con stream, I've got new emotes commissioned and everything."

Nell grinned. "Nice, dude."

"Yeah!" He fanned himself with his free hand. "Gosh it is HOT in this thing, though."

Janice laughed. "What did you expect? It's the price you pay! Gosh, back in the day, let me tell you—"

Canopy smiled as her friends continued to chat and reminisce, basking in the social warmth of being close to the people she cared about. She'd really missed this, in a way she hadn't understood before.

A small pair of hands reached up to grab one of her comics. She leaned forward, making eye contact with the kid in the fuzzy-eared hoodie. "Hi there!" she said in a singsong voice.

"Hi!" the child said with a big smile. "What's this?"

"It's a book about a lady giant who turns mean ol' robbers into plants, and takes care of them to teach them a lesson!"

"Whoaaa," the young customer replied, staring at the cover.

"Well *that's* an interesting story," a woman said, stepping over from a nearby table and putting a gentle hand on the child's shoulder.

Canopy looked up. Then froze for a moment. "Hi, Renée."

Renée smiled, "Hey, Canopy. Long time no see."

"Heheh, yeah, ah... Wow, you look really nice!"

Renée flexed an arm. "Hah, thanks! Though maybe I should've dug out my old uniform today, it could pass for a costume out here."

Canopy grinned. "It's the opposite for me! No one bats an eye." Her smile faded a bit, as she searched for the best way to continue the conversation. "You, uh... you've been doing okay?"

The child looked up at Renée, then at Canopy, then back at Renée. "Mommy, mommy, who's this?"

Renée bent down on one knee, her voice taking on a gentler tone. "That's Canopy! She's a friend."

The child looked over, their face suddenly beaming. "Hi, Canopy!" they said. "I'm Jo!"

"Hi, Jo!" Canopy replied, smiling as her heart swelled with a complex mix of emotions.

"So, yeah," Renée said as she stood back up. "You know, same old

same old. Taking care of trees, setting up community gardens. We've also got a couple new farmers coming by the weekly market too, it's been getting real busy."

"Oh, nice!"

"Mm hmm. How about you? How's the new place?"

"It's... good!" Canopy said, a bit relieved she didn't have to find a way to broach the subject, or avoid it altogether. "Double and I moved in together. A spot opened that we couldn't pass up, in a place with one of those uh, rooftop garden things..."

"Living roof," Double specified.

"Yeah! That's the word," Canopy said with a sheepish smile.

Renée nodded, looking over the art on the plant girl's side of the table. "I see! That sounds right up your alley."

"Ahaha, you could say that! I've been learning how to help take care of it."

"That's great," Renée said, her eyes meeting Canopy's. "Learning to take better care of the trees in your life. I knew you had it in you."

The plant girl quickly broke eye contact, chuckling awkwardly. "Well, you know me! Gotta keep dragging myself forward, kicking and scream—"

"Canopy," Double chided.

"Oh, right," Canopy said, gently rubbing the back of her head self-consciously. "Force of habit. My therapist has been helping me find more, uh... sustainable ways to grow, going forward. They've been really helpful."

"We've been getting her more horticulture books just in case," Double said, eliciting a withering gaze from Canopy.

"Good!" Renée replied with a hearty chuckle.

"Are those DINOSAURS?" Jo asked, peeking at the book Double was holding.

"Cassowaries," they replied. "They're a kind of bird."

"Can I see?"

Double looked up to Renée, who nodded. "Sure," they said, crouching down and holding the book open to let the child have a closer look. And, incidentally, giving Renée and Canopy a little more privacy.

The gardener turned to the plant girl with a look of guarded kindness. "Glad to see you're doing alright," she said.

"Yeah, same," Canopy replied. She took a deep breath. She'd had this conversation in her mind multiple times over the past year, but now that it was here, she felt woefully unprepared. But that didn't stop her. "Hey, uh... Sorry about the whole... Ugh." Another deep breath. "I'm sorry I put so much on your shoulders back then."

"Hey now, no worries. It happens! Wasn't my first time, either." Renée chuckled. "But it was one I'm not likely to forget."

Canopy buried her face in her hands. "Oh my gosh, I was such a mess."

Renée laughed heartily. "Oh no no, I'm not saying it was bad! We've all been there." She reached out, holding a hand over the table.

Canopy looked at it, then back at Renée. Tentatively, she reached out.

Renée took the plant girl's hand and gave it a warm, gentle squeeze. They shook once, and then let go.

"Believe me, it's okay," Renée said. "I'm glad I was able to help. We've all been messes at one point or another."

"Yeah. Well, thanks for bearing with mine. I'm really grateful."

"Anytime," Renée said with a confident grin. "Well, probably just that one time. I've got my hands full these days." She reached over to give Jo an affectionate pat on the head.

Canopy laughed. "That's fair! It's my turn now."

"Yeah! Gotta pay it forward."

The plant girl leaned back, looking over the park and its sea of attendees. She remembered her first convention: the intimidation of walking up to that first crowd, but also the elation and relief at finding so many kindred souls in a single place. She'd grown so much since then. And, truth be told, she still had a lot of growing to do. But she'd already learned a lot, and she could help others learn alongside her. It was only natural; what any good neighbor would do.

Canopy nodded. "I'll do my best!"

"That's all you need," Renée said with a smile. "You're gonna do great."

*-Fin*



**Double:** (▽▽)/

**NellDotWham:** hey what's up?

**Double:** Found more information about the  
manufacturer.

**NellDotWham:** what manufacturer

**NellDotWham:** wait

**NellDotWham:** WAIT OMG

**NellDotWham:** IS DOGGO LAMP REAL

**Double:** They don't make dog lamps.

**NellDotWham:** :C

**Double:** But they are part of a business alliance of  
sorts.

**NellDotWham:** an alliance? like, with other lamp  
makers?

**Double:** Among other things.

**Double:** Such as a pet supply company.

**NellDotWham:** ...

**NellDotWham:** so

**NellDotWham:** do they make dog beds

**Double:** (☆<sup>~</sup>w~)

\* Double has shared a link.



# —Something More—

From Zandra's Writing Hours

I can't figure  
this character  
out.



Az'20

Girl?  
Nonbinary?  
Neither feels  
completely right...



RRRGH!!!

It feels like I'm  
going in  
circles!



YOU CAN BE  
BOTH!  
!!



OH!! OF course!  
I have friends who  
are both, why didn't it  
occur to me?



It all makes  
so much sense!!  
You can...





# About the Author

Name:	Alex Zandra
Inner Beast:	mouse
Gender:	nonbinary woman
Pronouns:	she/her
Class:	Light Novel Author
Level:	40

Alex Zandra had been designing and developing games for more than 20 years when one day she got so angry at Nintendo that she wrote a light novel out of spite. That was her first; this is her sixth. Time really does fly!

When she's not streaming—or making—video games, Zandra likes to draw, give talks on game design, dabble in fashion, and more! But most of all, she loves writing wholesome stories about relatable characters having transformative experiences. Oh, and gender feels, of course!

The feels are important. <3