

## Theseus by Age

“Right. Kim.”

His body stretches out in the room behind you, branching out into three distinct parts past the wine cabinet. It’s not a clean fork, the trunk splits off lazily like a river here and there. Actually no, trunk is the wrong word. He’s many things, but he’s not a tree. And the *trunk* trunk is, well, you can’t see it from here anyway.

“I kept peeing when I shouldn’t piss, and sometimes I couldn’t piss when I wanted to. The pain was the worst part, though. Something about the bladder. So I talked to my doctor, and she told me about Kim. Or, I think she called him Dr. Martins. Kim Martins. I, uh... I thought it was a beautiful name.”

He’s a mosaic of animal skin and fur and scales and feathers, shining like a cathedral. So many animals, big or small, from all parts of the world. You don’t even know the names of them all. But under all that, past the masses of interlocked organs and limbs, beats a human heart. He’s got a whole lot of hearts, on account of all the blood that needs pumping.

“*Dr. Martins* brought up the idea of a replacement. He had been working on an artificial bladder, something with wires, but it creeped me out. I wanted something organic, something real, you know? But there was no way he could source a human bladder on short notice. So we went with a pig bladder in the end. It was all right for a while, I couldn’t hold as much, but I could live. Pretty well, in fact. Kim was a good surgeon, and whatever he did kept the infections away. So I thought.”

He gestures vaguely at the end of his body with some limbs. He has so many bladders and so many exits. When he talks to you, he tries to singletongue it to make things easier. It can be a bit distracting to hear two stories from three mouths at the same time, especially when one of them is a beak you can’t read the lips of. The mouth you’re currently lost in is part pig snout, part canine, human lips, tusks and fangs framing a big sticky froggy tongue. No wait, human? Maybe they were fish lips. There was little human left. Whiskers tickle your back.

“After a while though, I noticed I was thinking more. I recognized things I couldn’t place. My diet was a mess. And one day I swore I could hear voices from the fields. I was high so I tried to forget about it, but then at the petting zoo I found out. The pigs could speak, had been talking this whole time. One of them threw insults at me. It occurred to me that I knew how to speak it too. So I told Kim.”

Your eyes read his back like the rings of a tree. The razzle-dazzle lump from their visit to the dog pound, what would happen if he took patches from multiple breeds of the same species? Would he learn languages or accents? Just accents. Or all the farm animal parts, all in the same area, bigger than his newer parts. Unlocked gates are a man’s best friend, he said.

“Kim didn’t believe me at first, but I proved it with a facetime call out in the mud. He didn’t know what to do, at first.”

He’s been dreaming about an insect section, but bugs are so small. It’s not so easy to sew a stinger to your butt, much less pump the right blood into it, apparently. Thinking back at the trunk, gosh, trunk really is the wrong word isn’t it. It makes him sound like he’s a tapeworm, like he’s just a snake with extra tails. That’s not true. The way his body twists is full of surprises. Like the bird section near the end. Or the horse.

“Kim wanted fame, and he knew this was his chance to become something big. Here you have this loser who learns to talk to pigs after a procedure *he* did, with all kinds of weird implications about semantic fields or whatever. We don't think semantic fields are a real thing anymore, actually, but either way, he couldn't throw this out into the open and A, let a bunch of filthy surgeons and doctors and scientists take this chance away from him...”

His snout took a deep breath, passing the baton to another mouth. They overlapped for a split second, the two pitches creating a short-lived harmony.

“...or B, risk me getting wheeled away by men in suits and hidden from the world. So he did the procedure on some other people. Gave them a pig bladder, or a pig heart. Convinced them they were sick, gave them some advance loans, tried to recreate what happened to me.”

Looking at the asymmetry, the mishmash menagerie of animals, some could have thought him indecisive, impulsive. But the mess makes sense to you. You can't always blueprint your body in advance, especially when you have to settle with whatever you can get your claws on next. Or talons. You love the sound of talon.

“None of them worked. I mean, the organs worked. Mostly, at least. One of them did die. But none of them could talk to pigs. There was always the chance that we just had to wait a few years, but we didn't have the time. I started living in Kim's apartment while he monitored my vitals and smuggled pigs. He had a lot of money lying around, so I was well fed and I didn't have much to complain about. I used to wonder how he got so rich.”

There's the smell of sizzling meat in the kitchen. Sounds of plates sliding onto the table. He's humming to himself in there, making dinner. He must have started while the two of you were talking. He has to cook a lot to feed his growing body, but he's used to multitasking.

“He took another path. Setting me free was risky. Replicating me wasn't working. And the whole knowledge osmosis thing was already weird enough that it forced him to think differently. So he decided to experiment. With my consent, of course. What if he gave me something else from something else? Would I learn to talk to it too? So we borrowed a good stretcher and some equipment and disinfected the guest room. It started with the dog ears.”

You don't see any dog ears from where you're sitting, but you saw some when you first met. So different. Sensitive. You remember whispering into them and patting his head, carefully. He wouldn't let you see a face.

“I had to get used to the new hearing. Kim carved them from some collared bitch, sorry, I know you hate that word. Some bitch in an alley. Sorry. I keep messing up. She was yelling at me, scared, knew more than we thought she could know. Looking back, Kim didn't really go about this the best way. That dog was in a lot of pain, and we had to put her down eventually. I felt horrible about it. So I prefer the new way. Clean cuts, putting them to sleep with the same drugs Kim used on me. Cutting off a cat's tongue for the advancement of science might be hard to swallow for a doctor, but it's even worse when you can tell what it's trying to say. Fuck. I can't unhear it.”

You don't mind the language or the imagery, not today. You wanted to hear about his life, and this story is a real breakthrough. One day he might even let you make an incision.

“We kept experimenting. Any piece of animal, even far away from the brain, taught me what I needed to know. It felt good to know so much, think all these new thoughts. Usually they just carried language, but there were always surprises. Instant integration, no compatibility issues, my immune system loved it. Kim never expected my tail to work, right? And I didn't either, to be honest. The nerves weren't even there, but somehow... it just... We came to the conclusion that I was unique. I liked that. The only thing I didn't like

was that he would go pick up more animals without even asking me. Before I left, he had started restraining me, drugging me for longer, doing surgeries just to shut me up. I lost a lot of blood, so he had to improvise.”

You can feel his hesitation. The room is quiet, as quiet as it can physically get. The kitchen is almost quiet too. It reminds you of the cancer scare, how sore it was to talk about. The naked mole-rat skin. He thought he could use it as a makeshift callous. Now their organs are peppered inside him. He’s so resourceful, if only he knew how smart he was behind all that prosthetic knowledge.

“I... I don't know. I'm not sure if I want to keep going. A lot of shit happened.”

Noticing a tear falling from an eye, you stretch up to wipe it away. You brush away a lock of human hair, and look into his original set. So intelligent and human, still. He faces away, flustered, another face facing you. Dinner is ready! Smells like pancakes. Homemade.

“Thanks. I love you, you know. I'm sorry you had to sit here and listen to all of this. God, what a buzz-kill I am! I must have cried from every eye by now. But I feel a lot better getting this off my chests.”

You look over at one chest. Lewd. He must have undressed a little. He smiles at you, and winks with his left eyes. Oh my, he did that on purpose.

“Come on, let's go eat dinner. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.”

You're eating cheap spaghetti and meatballs, he's eating three plates of vegetarian food. He doesn't eat meat anymore, he says. It feels wrong. When the section furthest away from you is done eating, it starts doing dishes and packing leftovers into fridges. No, *it* is also the wrong word. All parts of him are he, even the ones you wouldn't expect. He takes your plate and turns away so he can face you from the first face again.

“I remember one time a long time ago in school, we had a unit about Greek myths and legends and all that philosophy they were up to. Like the ship of Theseus. I thought that whole thing was kind of stupid. A ship's a ship.”

He, uh. Let's call it a shrug. He shrugs, kind of.

“Or so I thought. I think there are a lot of places you could take that ship. Imagine if they kept building that ship. For decades. They find better wood, forge stronger metals, screw the bolts even tighter. It's still the same ship, but it's so much better now. Give it even more time, and maybe one day you could teach it to fly. And it's still the same ship. At least that's what I think. Replace all the parts, and it's still the same thing. I'm living proof of that! I think we would all be a lot happier if we could just accept that people *change*. It took me a long time before I, uh... realized some things about myself. For example.”

He blushes. You hear rustling and movement, a rumble. He's so flustered, poor thing. He still has a lot of reservations and discomforts. It's understandable. Quite understandable. He's got so many thoughts inside those brains of his.

“I'm getting tired, I should hit the beds soon. But first, I downloaded a *certain* album. I remember what you said about your favourite song, and I remember how excited you were when we listened to it together. I want an encore.”

Some part of him turns on the stereo and you hear it. It brings you back to the first date. The first kiss. Running your fingers down the stitches. The song is nothing special, depressing juvenile lyrics and a generic upbeat beat, but something about the contrast has always spoken to you. You dance with him, and it's a little awkward. You have to step around and over him, grab his claws and talons and paws and heads and wings. Give his limbs something to do, so he doesn't just stand there fiddling with many somethings. He's a nervous little guy, but he's warming up. You're both happy. Then the song ends, and

you're ready to go to bed.

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“You know, when I left, my face was almost entirely this big handsome pig's, with those big manly tusks and a big plump snout. I even considered turning my legs into little trotters to match, but I was still bipedal at the time, and I needed all the balance I could get. I wanted to honour how it all began, you know, that fleshy seed of pig that helped me become all of me. I wanted something more tangible than an old bladder hidden under a few layers of flesh, and my human face was starting to bore me anyway.”

Pigs. He always talked about how intelligent pigs are, about how clean they are, how they are some of the most human animals we have. You knew about the pig bladder and that one ear, but you had no idea he had a pig phase like that. They must still be in there somewhere, buried underneath the newer additions.

“Ah, I remember seeing a fresh face in the mirror, wiping the blood and disinfecting the cuts, licking my snout with my long tongue. God, the long black hair hanging down over my new face, seeing my facial hair on the sides of my face where I was still human, and my golden retriever ears crowning it all. Why shave when your body is covered in hide and feathers and whatnot, am I right?”

His faces twist into grins. You lie next to him, bathing in the afterglow. There's a yawn from an idle set of lungs. He always gets so... esoteric when it gets late.

“The patches took up so much space. I cared so much about symmetry. The first lion I found lost his left leg, and I didn't want the lopsided gait of one human foot and one lion foot slowing me down. I drew lines on all my joints and intersections to measure out where to cut myself open, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, but with all that wasted space between each part. Can you imagine, I used to hate the seams! Now seams are *me*.”

He laughs, in all of his languages and frequencies. Each echo sounds a little different. It's so raw, unfiltered.

“But my work is not yet done. I have seen the soft contours of something none of my beautiful eyes have ever seen before. And with my mosaic ears I hear a song. I don't know the lyrics yet, but I will one day.”

He was speaking in prose now. You hear the squelch of udder milking, and the smacking of a mouth that drinks. He offers you some, and the fleshy tube that deposits it tastes like sweet honey. Homemade. It's true, his eyes are beautiful, all nineteen of them.

“Ah yes, that's right, I don't think I ever told you how I learned all this. Not the instincts and language and stuff, you've already heard that in stereo. No, I mean how the bones get rearranged and skin gets sown and organs fit. How to make a body work, you know? After I learned how to learn, how did I learn to... upgrade my knowledge, so to speak?”

You nod. There are so many things you don't know yet, many blank spots between the dog ears and the first date. He stands up a little bit, something rubs against you.

“Well, one day, after another painful operation that left me wet and writhing under the restraints, Kim packed up his medical kit. A practiced motion, if a bit sloppy. His hands were shaking. The weight of what he'd done was crushing him. On his way out, before I could regain movement in my arms, my dog ears heard something hit the carpet with the softest thud.”

His favourite talon is stroking your hair.

“He dropped his scalpel.”

That night he gives you a hug, envelops and surrounds you in a blanket of sensations, of feathers and scales, fur and skin, dampness and softness and warmth and cold. The ecosystem running its functions around you. He whispers high and low into your ears from all angles, and you feel the steady rhythms of his heartbeats pumping so many flavours of blood. He's been tense all day, but he relaxes his tendons when he coils around you, his little teddy bear. Your hand ruffles his hair, feels the scar above his hippocampus. Human skin with two tints. You thought you could hear him crying faintly, but he could also be laughing. Most of the time it was both.