

## Chameleon

“Goooooooooooood morning...” the alarm clock was then interrupted by the fall of Kimberly’s hand colliding with the snooze button. She rolled over and looked at her husband and his ebony rat nest as his grog laced mug started to squirm. Nigel’s gazed upon a mess of wrinkled pajamas that enveloped the anti-energy expression of a woman he called his own. They both exchanged expressions of gratitude and greetings that were drunken on the spirit that was 4:15 in the morning. The two of them exchanged the routine of using a shower and making a usual fruit smoothie with toast and eggs. Once they sat down for breakfast at the fading 5:00 a.m. moon casting into their kitchen, Kim looked at her booklet.

“Today we’re doing lions,” she exclaimed with the enthusiasm of a half sleeping child.

“Why exactly do we have to do this kind of thing again?” Nigel asked for the 36<sup>th</sup> time since they were married.

“You wanted to find a way to bring in visitors and we both agreed this was a good way to do so.”

“But even this is a bit extensive. I’m not sure how much our supervisors are willing to finance these stunts.”

“It brings in guests, the kids love the bit, and people do learn at the end of the day,” retorted Kim as she loaded her dishes into the dishwasher.

“You do a great job at this and it reminds me why I made you my queen of the pride,” Nigel replied as they departed for their uniforms.

The day began. Kim hauled opened her steam trunk and began her descent from human to lioness. Fingering through the membranes of rubber plastic that ranged from beaks to

blowholes, she uncovered a fat-topped Y with nostrils and applied it to mask her nose. Next, her ears became enveloped cordless earmuffs with a savanna emphasis on the ear. Kim then reached for a bottle and box and beheld in the mirror as her teeth took refuge in fangs and her spy point took refuge underneath big wild cat slits prescribed for lions with glasses. Now armed with makeup brushes, Kim's face became a sticky temporary home for artificial fur that would receive the Midas touch on the top, a whitening out underneath and bare lips becoming black as wet earth. To the luck of her stars, Kim's hair was short enough to only need to be dyed instead of cut. Lions are the ones with manes, not lionesses. Kim retired to her closet and sorted through the jumpsuits of all textures to find artificial lion pelt. The skin for the wild cat was right between the rainbow of paradise feathers and fake leather that made lizard scales. Kim slipped on the tight skin which took about two minutes before asking for Nigel's help with the zipper in the back. With the slip of some tight gloves and even tighter boots, her feet and hands were now paws complete with claws. The whole outfit was snug, but how else was Kim going to get her standard zoo uniform over it? Now the two departed for their job by 7:15 a.m.

Red traffic lights always brought out what was on someone's mind. Kim noticed that Nigel's eyes weren't fully invested in the fact they were behind three cars, the person behind them was shouting and he didn't express agony the light was only green for two seconds.

"Are you still thinking about my costumes?" Kim asked checking to make sure her contact lenses weren't cross-eyed.

"No. I wasn't counting the hours it took to get ready and comparing them to regular days to see how many could have been saved. All one and a half of them for the little cheap things that add up to a big bill," Nigel remarked.

“Look, it helps me to practice all the things I like at once. Designing costumes, performing for crowds and it looks good for people looking for help on stage and in movies.”

“I know that but...”

“What is it? You know this is only once a week.”

Nigel looked at his wife right in the eye as they stopped at another red light.

“No it isn’t! Whenever there is a birthday party, or a holiday or just an event in general you bring it upon yourself to be the ‘animal mascot’ of every event we go to,” Nigel bellowed.

“Hey, you like it when we do matching and I could get you suited up next week for the zebras,” Kim calmly replied.

“That isn’t what I’m going for. I’m not sure we can afford this. Not a single produce has called, sent an email or even a letter. Not even for *Cats*.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“We’re just worried that, all this might be for nothing. That we’ve been wasting time and money, just so you could play dress up.”

“We?”

“The employees at the zoo and sometimes I wonder how the animals feel about it. I’m just worried that... what if we have to look after someone else suddenly? How could we take care of each other then?” There was a brief silence before they pulled into the employee parking lot. The two of them wanted to raise a family, even if it was in an apartment. Kim and Nigel have been checking every day for the past eternal nine months.

“Tell you what. I’ll talk to the manager and see if he will let me go the rest of the month costume free. Maybe even two months,” Kim said. A shy smile was exchanged as they departed into the zoo’s back entrance.

A costume vacation would begin after the lion exposition. This information lingered in Kim's mind as she guided a group of families along the Savannah exhibit. This would be something to adjust to. Dressing up like an animal was so much fun. This is a chance to wonder if these creatures could tell stories the way people did outside of their enclosures. For a while, the explanation of the ladies doing all the work in the pride while males looked for danger would feel shallow coming from just a human. Then again, that isn't what a zoo was about. The animals didn't seem to pay any attention to her even when she was fully decked out like them. As the day progressed, Kim noticed the sun beating down and remembered why Nigel didn't do this kind of thing very often. She could feel the hairs on her face falling off as she perspired. This wasn't a problem since she was the only one who would have noticed the difference of about two dozen individual tufts descending to the ground. The fur and uniform didn't help on this day when clouds were scarce. Maybe this break would be nice. This thought sank in as she guided some tourists to relieving air conditioned gift shop, toward the most handsome tour guide in the world she called her own. The thought of a break in front of the vent sent a chilling satisfaction down her spine. A spine that felt a little longer at the bottom than usual.

The day went from beginning to end like every day at the zoo. It being full of squealing children, lackadaisical adults, bewildered tourists, artists stopping for sketches, animal rights activists protesting without consulting anyone, and the animals just enjoying the attention and relaxation. The employees discussed how the news in the world was so great with traffic blocking, robberies in city communities and everything in between. Kim and Nigel returned home after the long day that was accustomed. Kim soaked her face in a bowl of warm water to

wash off her makeup and changed into her usual sleeping attire alongside her husband. They then closed Saturday with the usual buffalo chicken pizza and a reasonable Burgundy to a Tom Hanks movie before going to bed. Sleeping off the day to end all previous days.

At the touch of the mid-morning sun, Kim noticed something. She lifted her hand to gaze upon a striation of black and white and finger tips of solid hard nails. Clipping the bottom of her feet, she returned to the bathroom to come eye to eye with her canceled costume for next week. A striped short mohawk, a black nose of velvet and tall funnel ears now took refuge on her face and there was a lovely stub of a tail right at the bottom of her backside.

*I don't remember touching the makeup and costumes.*

Kim pulled off the fake tail only to whinny like she was underwater in agony. Her ears twitched when she started fumbling around her neck and shoulders for the zipper to this costume. Kim ran to the closet and sorted through her untouched costumes to find all of them there, even the zebra costume.

"I heard you scream, is something the matter?" Nigel beckoning to his distressed wife. Kim ran to her make-up steam trunk to find the horse relative makeup just the way she left it three months ago.

"I'm a zebra," Kim stuttered with absolute terror.

"What?"

"Look at me!"

"What am I supposed to be seeing?" Nigel puzzled. Kim was confused.

"You don't see these stripes, the ears or this..." Kim angstily touched her hair.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You look just fine, like a human, yourself," Nigel cautioned. Worried, Kim rushed into the shower and rained heated water down her body,

pajamas and all for a good five minutes. She returned to the mirror to only see that she was wet and still covered in furry stripes accompanied with a tail and soaked donkey ears, cold and wide awake. She ran to her husband in the living room.

“How do you not see this!?” Kim exclaimed.

“Look, I know this is tough giving up your makeup but the break was your idea. I’ll get a towel and some dry clothes for you,” Nigel said acting like he had no idea what he was supposed to be looking at.

*How could he do this, I’m obviously a zebra.*

She even smelled like the one at the zoo after a rainstorm. Kim heard footsteps outside the apartment and grabbed the person they belonged to. She brought the preacher on his way to a sermon in just as Nigel came in with a large lavender towel.

“Tell him Father Baker, tell him I look like a zebra,” she hyperventilated. The preacher appeared to have seen the Lord do the chicken dance upside down as her husband wrapped the towel around her. As the water left her skin, Kim felt her body changing. Her fur fluffed up trading in striped velvet for spotted fuzz, her ears rounding out, hair scruffing down, hooved feet and hands becoming paws with claws and her nose gaining a predatory muzzle complete with sharp fangs.

“Is there anything I should be concerned with?” Father Baker asked with as much confusion as Nigel.

“Maybe, I don’t know if it’s anything I did or what. We’ll calm down first and then we’ll come to you,” Nigel exclaimed like nothing happened.

“Would it help if I told him you look like a zebra?” the preacher asked slowly walking to the front door.

“Did you guys not just see I became a hyena?!” Kim exclaimed.

“I think you just became dry and paranoid. You still look like a young woman Kimberly,” Father Baker concluded on the way out. Baffled, Kim put on her dry clothes and went to each of her neighbors and asked each of them if they noticed she was part animal. They all said the same thing, whether she was an elephant, giraffe, blue jay, bat, crocodile, poison arrow dart frog, cockroach, octopus, and anteater. They only saw Kimberly Jameson, human being who worked at the zoo. None of them saw that she was clearly not. She returned covered in rugged scales with three horns sticking out of her head with a curly tail, three fingers and two thumbs and her eyes looking in different directions at the same time. Kim sat down on the couch exhausted and completely horrified that no one noticed. Her loyal husband didn’t even notice that she caught a fly with her tongue and ate it without wrenching it.

“Is there something we should talk about?” Nigel asked as he sat down next to his wife who felt reptilian. Kim sulked as he set the mail down on the noon bathed coffee table.

“I don’t know if this could help but I checked through our mail and we should be expecting someone,” He said.

“Who?” Kim asked not caring.

“The tests came back positive,” Nigel smiled with a gentle nod.