

Objects of Desire

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Everyone was getting skewlis. I wanted one so much it hurt.

I didn't know about trends. I hated that when three of my friends got black high-top shoes with light-up lightning bolts on them, I wanted my own pair *sooo* much. I mean, why should I care? It was like some chip in my head switched on and said WANT. It kept digging at me until I whined at Mom.

She used to just give me whatever I wanted, but since her job diminishment, she couldn't afford to do that anymore.

Sometimes she talked to me about worldview, global per-spective, how we were small in something giant and we had to work with all the other things to get along okay, and when I listened hard enough, I could shut the WANT chip off.

Sometimes she just said, "Kirby, shut up about it now," but the chip kept sending the WANT message. It was hard to ignore.

So anyway, people at school started showing up with skewlis. Sort of a cross between a weasel and a cat: skewlis had round heads with cute pointy ears and big eyes, slinky arms and legs that wrapped around your arm, and long bodies that bent when your elbow bent. They came in designer colors and patterns like Blue Razzberry and Circuit-board and Seawave. Smart enough to fetch, open cup-boards and drawers, learn cute tricks, and accomplish small tasks. Motivated by specially engineered snacks that kept them willing and docile. Guaranteed by the F.P.A. to not be usable as weapons.

Pretty soon most of my friends and a lot of other kids were walking around with skewlis heads on one shoulder or the other, skewlis bodies doubling the width of one arm. People looked like mutants. Honto cool mutants.

The best skewlis brands had tons of max-excellent options. You could computer-blend a color scheme and the company would build you a skewlis to match. You could pick traits like "makes musical noises" or "will act as alarm clock." My friend Pati got one that would hold her bookscreen for her while she read, and press the text-scroll icon when she nodded.

I didn't want a skewlis at first. They were just too weird and creepy.

But after almost everybody I knew got one, I started feeling odd without that extra head on one shoulder, that widening of one arm, that pair of jewel eyes watching every-thing. I felt deformed.

So when Grandma got me a skewlis for my birthday, I was glad.

My fourteenth birthday party was nothing like my thir-teenth birthday party had been. Between this year and last year, Mom lost her big job and had to take little ones, so I couldn't have a huge party and invite tons of friends over.

Mom, Grandma, and I sat around the kitchen table. Mom had managed to get enough meat for us to have my favorite, beef stew, and Grandma had baked me a small square cake and covered it with strawberry frosting. Which was a great switch from basic rations. No matter what color or shape they make base, it all tastes pretty much like cardboard.

After we ate dinner and the cake and said how great it tasted, I opened my two presents: a new pen with temperature-sensitive skin that changed colors, and a silver shirt with a hologram of my favorite band on the front. Both of these presents were things I really liked. I throttled the little voice inside that whined because I didn't get more. I said a lot of thank-yous and hugged my presents and figured that was it.

Then Grandma brought the carry-cage out from under the table. A faint smell of lemons and incense came from the cage.

She set the carry-cage in front of me.

For a second I couldn't breathe. I knew we couldn't afford what I really wanted. Maybe she had gotten me a kitten. That would be okay. If Mom said it was, anyway. I would need to get extra after-school jobs so I could buy cat food.

I leaned forward and opened the door of the ribbon-wound carry-cage.

The skewlis emerged slowly. At first I thought it was gray, and I felt a flicker of disappointment. At school, people fussed most about skewlis with bright colors: turquoise, cotton-candy pink, acid green with baby-blue stripes. This one looked dull in comparison.

Then light glanced off it, and I saw that it was a soft lavender color. Its huge eyes glowed orange-red. Its front feet looked just like little black hands. It came out onto the table among the confetti and torn gift wrapping, then sat back and stared up at me.

I stared back, wondering what it was thinking. What did any pet think confronted with a new owner? *I have to spend the rest of my life with you whether I like it or not? Amuse me? Oh, no?*

It lifted one small black hand and held it palm outward toward me. Confused, I lifted my own hand in answer and slowly brought it forward.

The skewlis touched its palm to mine. Its hand felt hard and small and hot. My hand tingled around its touch. It made a chirring noise, jumped over my hand, and clamped its arms around my upper arm, bringing its head up beside mine. Its lemony smell grew stronger for a second, then faded. The tip of a pink tongue flicked from its mouth. Its orange eyes stared at my face from unnervingly close.

It seemed to weigh almost nothing. The grip of its arms and legs around my arm felt weird for a moment, but then I stopped noticing. I turned to Grandma. "Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you."

"Oh, good," she said. "I hoped you would like it." She hesitated, then said, "It's not one of the famous brands."

Grandma was a veteran bargain hunter. She specialized in factory seconds, reconditioned obsolescence, open box returns, and "that stain is so small no one else will ever notice it, but they knocked five dollars off anyway." I used to think she was funny and irritating about that stuff, but lately I'd been trying to learn how she did it.

The best skewlis on the market had small seven-pointed stars branded onto their hind legs. There were two other acceptable brands, but after that, you got into the gray area of copycat skewlis. Rip-off companies put together inferior versions. I'd heard about near-skewlis fakes and their problems.

I didn't want to think about that on my birthday, when my grandmother had just given me the perfect present.

My skewlis had a brand I'd never seen before, a little blue spiral almost hidden by the silver-lavender fur on its hind leg.

"It's all right," I said.

"It doesn't have any of those fancy features," she continued, looking worried.

"It's great, Grandma," I said. "It's perfect. Thank you." With the skewlis so close to me now, I could see a very faint tiger-stripe pattern in blue over the silvery lavender of its coat. My skewlis looked like a ghost version of others I had seen, and I thought it was really honto neat.

"What will you call him, Kirby?" Mom asked me. Her voice had a familiar edge to it. Grandma had done something important without asking her again. Mom was mad. But it was my birthday, and she didn't want to be the bad guy.

I stroked my finger over the top of the skewlis's head. It closed its eyes and chirred. "Her name is Vespa," I said in a small voice.

Vespa opened her eyes to stare into mine. Her chirrs grew louder. I didn't remember any of my

friends' skewlis making noises like this, but it sure made me feel warm and strange.

"Vespa?" Mom said. "You're naming her after a scooter?"

"Huh? I don't know what you mean. It's just her name."

"Oh," she said. She smiled and shook her head.

I looked at Grandma. "Is there a manual? How do I take care of her? What do I feed her?" I thought about the special food my friends fed their skewlis: small soft brown cubes. I wondered how expensive it was. Probably really expensive, the way most designer stuff was. Had Grandma bought some? Was Vespa hungry now?

Grandma licked her lips, looking away from Mom's accus-ing stare. "There's no manual," she said. "The man I got her from told me she'll eat what humans eat, and she just needs a little box with sand in the bottom to do her duties in. Always give her access to fresh water, and bathe her about once a week with water and baby shampoo. He said...he said she'll teach you what she needs." She reached under the table and brought up a small sack of cat litter and a high-sided plastic tray. "For starters," she said.

"Thanks!"

Vespa rubbed her head against the side of my head. Her fur was exquisitely soft. She smelled so good. Lemon, stick incense, fresh bread.

There wasn't much left of dinner, it had all been so good. I pressed cake crumbs together and held them up in my hand. Vespa reached out, grabbed a handful, and sniffed them, then ate them. She chirped.

"You can keep the carry-cage," Grandma said.

"Thank you, Grandma. It's a terrific present. Thank you." I glanced at Mom. "I'll get more babysitting jobs. I'll make enough money to feed her," I said. "She's so little, I bet it won't take much."

Mom's frown softened. "Oh, Kirby, it's not that."

Whatever it was, I didn't want to hear about it now. I just wanted to be happy for a little while. "Thanks, everybody, for the best presents and a great meal," I said.

I didn't even have to rack the dishes that night. I took my new things up to my room.

I only thought for a little while about the mountain of presents I had gotten last year when we could afford a big party, when Mom had loved getting me anything I wanted. A lot of those presents were broken and gone now, and a few I had sold so I could get some honto rad school clothes this year instead of the basics that Mom could afford.

I still had my lightning-bolt shoes from last year. Nobody in my class except me wore them anymore, but I still liked them, even though the batteries in the bolts were almost dead and the lightning only flickered when it rained.

It had been kind of weird not following everybody else from one trend to the next since Mom's downgrade. I watched how much I wanted something when all the other kids got it, and I watched how much I didn't want it two or three weeks later when they had moved on to something else. I felt like I was getting this figured out.

Until I got *total* skewlis envy, no matter how hard I tried to pretend I thought they were creepy and weird.

But so what? Grandma had done it! She'd managed to get a skewlis for me, who knew how! I didn't have to fight my longing anymore.

I glanced at Vespa. Her furry cheek was close to mine. She scanned my bedroom with fire-orange eyes. Warmth spread through me.

What if everybody had already moved on from skewlis to something else? What if, when I got to school tomorrow morning, I was the only one with a skewlis?

Vespa turned and stared into my eyes. I remembered how much I had wanted a skewlis, even though I knew there was no way. This time I didn't want my wanting to fade. I had Vespa. I needed to keep on wanting her, for both our sakes.

She reached out a tiny black hand and patted my cheek. Her fingers were warm. She grasped my earlobe, stared at it, and muttered small sounds more like bird-chirps than purrs. My throat tightened for a moment. I felt amazingly happy.

I filled a cup with water in the bathroom and showed it to Vespa. She jumped down off my shoulder and drank three cups full. I also set up the litter box and showed it to her. She stared at it for a long moment, then looked at me sideways. I wasn't sure what to think. What if she had never used a litter box before? Was she even housebroken?

Oh well, deal with that tomorrow, if I had to.

Vespa jumped up onto my right arm. I patted my left shoulder, and after a moment she crept across my shoulders and locked onto my left arm. I cleaned my teeth and washed my face right-handed, with her still clinging to me. I wondered how we would sleep, or how I'd even change into the mega T-shirt I slept in.

But she responded when I patted the bed: jumped down off my arm and curled up, watching me change into my T-shirt. I went into the closet to hang up my clothes, though, and the instant I was out of her sight she made loud beeping/clicking noises that sounded sort of like a burglar alarm. I ducked back into the room and stared at her.

"Che, che," she scolded, reaching one hand out to me and frowning with her eyebrows. She looked like the ruler of the world.

Did all skewlis act like this? I wished I had documentation. Or that I could go downstairs and log on and look for information. But I didn't want to walk in on Mom and Grandma fighting.

I could ask people at school tomorrow.

I slid under the covers and waved the light out. A second later it lit again. Vespa held her hand out to it. She stared at the light for a moment, then looked at me. Her eyes looked spooky with the light coming from the side; small green moons floated in their centers.

Then she bounded up the bed until she was on the pillow next to my head. She held up her arm and waved the "lights-out" signal, and my room darkened.

I listened to her breathing, smelled her lemon-and-fresh-bread scent. I felt keyed up. I couldn't remember how smart my friends' skewlis had been. Could a skewlis figure out complicated cause-and-effect from just seeing it once? Maybe Vespa had learned that light switch trick somewhere else.

She purred.

I'd heard skewlis make all kinds of noises. I'd never heard one purr before. Before I could consider that, though, I got sleepy. The purring sounded so fine and reassuring. Like, "All's right with the world."

I opened my eyes the next morning and felt Vespa's hands on my forehead. She let go a second later, so I wondered if I had dreamed it.

When I went into the closet to get my school clothes, she followed me in. She clasped her arms and legs around my leg, scolding at me. I wondered if I was going to like close attention in such big doses.

Vespa shared my breakfast bars with me, and took a sip of juice concentrate.

What was I going to do about the litter box situation at school? Maybe somebody would explain it to me.

In the halls before school started, skewlis were still every-where. My friend Pati rushed up to me

and complimented me on Vespa. I looked at her baby-blue-eyed, pink-and-green-checked skewlis (named Ramtha) and realized I liked Vespa's coloring much better. Not that I said anything about it. Other friends gathered around and stared at Vespa, checked her brand, nodded to me as if I'd managed to squeak into their club.

I noticed five or six kids in the hall with black buttons big as hands on their jackets. Colored letters, kana, and Sanskrit flashed across the buttons, not making words, just pulling at my eyes.

"Oooo," said Pati, and raced off to inspect one of the but-tons.

I noticed the kids with buttons didn't have skewlis. *Well. The Next Hot Thing is here*, I thought.

Vespa patted my forehead. I didn't remember other skewlis doing that to anybody.

But it was strange. The WANT chip had switched on in my brain as soon as Pati ran away to look at buttons, even though I thought I had killed that chip by getting Vespa. I mean, I really thought I had killed that damned chip. What could be better than Vespa?

Stupid black buttons that didn't even make words?

I saw Rico smile as two girls asked him about his flashing button.

Vespa patted my forehead.

And the WANT chip switched off.

It was just school, and I hadn't done all my homework yet because I had celebrated my birthday by not making myself do the subjects I hated. I ignored the bright new buttons and plowed past everybody to get to study hall.

After school Pati and Arco and I walked through the downtown maxi-mall, window-shopping. Pati and Arco went into Everything Matters to look for belts. I didn't go inside. I love that store so much. I always see stuff I want, want, want and can't afford. It's easier for me to just stay out of it and not know what I'm missing. So I wandered over and looked at the food court instead, which was also not a good idea. Vespa and I had shared three lunch bars, and I wasn't hungry at all. But I saw a creampuff with chocolate on top. WANT.

Vespa patted my forehead.

Unwant.

Even though I could almost taste that creamy filling, the nice flaky, buttery pastry texture, the cold, hard bittersweet chocolate shell...

Vespa patted my forehead again, and I stopped craving.

Dazed, I wandered into Everything Matters. Glass ear-rings with little eyeballs in them. Pendants made of splatter-steel, jingling and throwing off light. Shoe gewgaws with col-ored gems all over them. The latest in cutaway gloves. Dice chains, fake eyebrow and nose piercings, and a whole row of wide leather belts with small copper and steel shapes grommeted to them.

WANT.

Pat, pat. Unwant.

"Look," Pati cried, showing me a belt. Gold weave with green gems.

"Pretty," I said as she twisted it around her waist. Her skewlis clung to her arm, but didn't seem to be paying atten-tion.

"No, really," Pati said. "Do you think it's me?"

"It's *so* you," Arco said. "*Ja?* What about this?" She held up a scarf with concentric black and red circles on it, then twisted it around her orange-streaked blonde hair. "*Moi?*" Her butter-yellow, tiger-striped skewlis seemed passive too.

"Def," Pati said.

Last time I had come in here with Pati and Arco and a couple other girls I had been so jealous of their credit ratings I couldn't think straight.

I narrowed my eyes and studied Arco. "Not," I said. "*So* not."

"Honto?" Arco said.

"Too down," I said. It did darken her whole look. "You're an up girl."

"Huh," said Arco. She put the scarf back.

She and Pati experimented with other things in the store. I watched, feeling Vespa's hand on my forehead every once in a while, almost before I knew I was getting sick with wanting again. The want kept going away. I felt a little dizzy and strangely good.

I went outside and over to the window of the leather store. There was a baby-blue suede jacket I had been craving for two weeks. I stared at it and felt nothing, even though Vespa didn't touch my forehead.

I had to sit down.

What was my skewlis doing to me?

I glanced at her. Her head turned as she watched people go by. She seemed fascinated by everything.

I watched too. Lots of people had skewlis grafted to their arms. Most of the skewlis looked tranced or dazed or asleep. None of them patted their people's foreheads. They just looked like...accessories.

"What are you?" I whispered to Vespa.

Her orange eyes stared into mine for a long moment.

Then Pati and Arco came out of the store, loaded down with plastic shimmer bags full of stuff. "Let's get pastry!" Arco said, and we went to the food court.

Pati treated me. She'd been doing that since Mom's diminishment. She never said anything about it. She was a good friend.

I gave Vespa a chunk of my brownie.

"Ack!" Pati said. "You're not supposed to do that!"

"Huh?"

"You're never, ever supposed to give them human food," she said. "It kills them."

Vespa ate her piece of brownie in three small neat bites, then licked her delicate black fingers and looked at Pati.

I said, "I didn't get any documentation. Grandma said she was supposed to eat human food. That's all I've fed her, and she hasn't died yet."

Arco shook her head. "That's *so* wrong. First thing in the manual is a great big warning to never feed them anything but their cubes." She broke off a piece of her raspberry doughnut and offered it to her skewlis, who gasped and shook its head. "Yours is weird," Arco said.

I stroked my hand down Vespa's back.

I knew she was weird.

I just didn't know how or why.

"I mean," Pati said. "Not that she isn't neat, or anything." Her face said one thing while her mouth said another.

"I like her a lot," I said.

Both my friends looked glum and uncomfortable.

Oh no, I thought. Not now.

They had stuck by me when Mom diminished. Pati even loaned me stuff that wasn't the latest, but was the next latest, so I wasn't too far behind and people weren't ashamed to be with me. Was my in-ness going to disappear just because my friends thought my pet was strange?

Vespa touched my forehead and I relaxed. Why want? Why fight? It would be all right.

"Eww," said Arco. "It keeps doing that."

"I like it," I said. Though I wasn't sure I did.

Arco's eyes narrowed a fraction. I felt her going away from me. It made me feel dizzy. Like she was on a motorcycle, looking back over her shoulder, and I was standing in the road. I would never catch up again.

I checked Pati to see if she was going away too. She smiled. "Maybe she's the new, improved kind."

I tapped the table with my free hand and Vespa dropped off my arm. She sat on the table in front of me and looked up into my eyes.

"Eww," said Arco. "You let her on the table? That you eat off of?"

"Huh?" There was so much I didn't know about skewlis care. I thought back to the scene in the cafeteria at lunchtime. People still wore their skewlis. In fact, the skewlis acted kind of like clothes, even in gym class. People ate with them on, did track with them on, played tennis and baseball...I mean. What was wrong with having them on the table, if they spent so much time on your arm? How different in cootie closeness was that?

I looked around. People at neighboring tables had skewlis. But the skewlis stayed on their arms even as they talked, ges-tured, used chopsticks or forks or spoons. What was the dif-ference whether the skewlis was on your arm or on the table? I couldn't figure out Arco's distaste. And then I realized.

Nobody else took their skewlis off where you could see it.

I tapped my left shoulder, and Vespa climbed up to lock herself on my left arm.

"She's..." Arco said. Her face pinched into a thoughtful frown. "She thinks too much." She shuddered, her yellow skewlis riding it out with flat, uncomprehending eyes.

Vespa blinked and looked down.

The rest of the afternoon she acted like all the other skewlis I could see.

Dumb.

When we got home, though, we could be alone. Mom and Grandma were still out. I sat down in the kitchen where no trace of last night's party remained. I tapped the table, and, after a glance at me, Vespa dropped down.

Grandma and her bargain-sniffing ability. Huh.

"You're not really a skewlis, are you?" I asked.

Vespa wandered across the table, glancing at the salt and pepper shakers. She touched the napkin holder, then paced around the edge of the table and ended up in front of me, exchanging gazes.

Finally she shook her head.

"Not really a skewlis," I said again. "What are you?"

She sat. She patted the table in front of her with one little black hand. Confused, I stared for a minute. Then I put my hand palm up on the table.

She put her hand palm to palm with mine, and I felt a strange tingling again.

Then it was like she talked to me, but not with words, exactly.

You're my test, she told me.

"Your test?"

My...experiment. My...guinea pig.

I felt totally creeped out then. My skin crawled. The hairs on my arms stood up. Every mad scientist movie I'd ever seen started playing in my head at the same time. "It's alive. ALIVE!"

Vespa tapped my palm. I shuddered and shook my head, then stared at her. She was just some weird little animal, not a mad scientist. Just some kind of computer glitch, probably, a rip-off skewlis whose dealer prep had misfired.

It was hard to believe that when she looked so...smart. Perfect. Not wrong.

It had to be something else. But what?

Maybe she was someone's experiment too.

She set her palm to mine again, and I stilled. *You're driven so by want*, she said.

Well, yeah, I thought. Duh.

All of you.

Everyone? It wasn't just me tortured and sliced open by wanting all these things that I usually couldn't get? I thought about Pati racing over to look at someone's shiny button that morning. I bet she knew by now where you could buy those things. She would have her own soon. Then maybe she'd stop wanting.

I was *so* sure. Of course she wouldn't. There would be the Next Hot Thing.

I licked my upper lip. "Okay," I said. "Let me get this straight. You're experimenting on me?" Silly. Idiotic. Scary, even.

She nodded.

"Like, how?" Not that I believed this for a second.

What happens to you when you don't have to want?

Sometimes I made myself sick, wanting things so much.

Today I had walked through Everything Matters, and I'd managed not to want anything in there.

With Vespa patting my forehead, anyway.

Everything in Everything Matters was sooo cool, sooo essential. Yet I didn't actually need any of it.

"What happens to me when I don't have to want?" I won-dered out loud.

I don't know yet. Maybe...

Before she finished that thought, she snatched her hand out of mine. But I'd seen a swirl of strange pictures and thoughts. Earth from space. The bridge of a spaceship, or close enough, anyway, with lots of small blob-shaped people talking to each other and studying TV programs coming from Earth. An intense fear that these *wanting* people would want so much they would force themselves into space, searching for some elusive thing that wouldn't satisfy them long.

They would boil into space, these Earth people, scorching everything before them and leaving smoke and ash behind.

Unless...

Unless they could be taught not to want so fiercely.

Who would they be if that one thing changed?

Why not find out?

"Stay here," I said, jumping up. I ran upstairs to my room and locked the door. Then I wrapped myself in a blanket and curled up in a corner to brood.

Kind of disgusting to think I was just some dumb rat in someone's maze. With, like, electrodes

attached to my brain, zap; teach you not to have *that* impulse, zap; run this way, that way, zap. Oops! Ha ha ha, let's get another rat.

Maybe this was just another thing that had happened because of Mom's diminishment. Only people with no money got bargain basement skewlis, which turned out to be alien mad scientists instead.

But Vespa was so much neater than all the other skewlis.

Sure. And she was playing with my mind. Stinging me in my want.

When I didn't really want to want things so much any-way.

Could she make it stop hurting?

But Arco thought it was weird that she patted my head. If she kept doing it, maybe I'd lose all my friends.

Maybe I wouldn't care, because I wouldn't *want* friends.

Ewwwww.

Maybe I'd turn into some kind of robot! Or a walking veg-etable. Or just a giant chicken. Buck buck. Or a cow. Chew, chew, chew, moo.

Maybe I'd be happy.

Maybe I'd change into someone else completely.

Would that be so bad?

I thought for a while longer, then wrote myself a note.

**DO YOU WANT TO GET OUT OF BED
IN THE MORNING?
IF YOU DON'T, STOP THE EXPERIMENT.**

I taped it to the ceiling over my bed, then went downstairs.

Vespa was still sitting on the kitchen table, hugging her-self. She looked really worried. Not something I'd ever seen a skewlis do before.

I sat down in front of her, took a deep breath, let it out. "Here's what I want," I said. Then laughed. I started over. "What if this turns me into some kind of walking zombie? I don't want to be a walking zombie! I don't want to be dumber than I already am. I don't want to be a...a ghost or an empty person. Do you understand that?"

She nodded.

"I'd kind of like to find out what happens with this experi-ment too," I said. "But what if it turns out to be a diminishment? I'm scared."

She looked away for a moment, then turned back and nodded.

"If it's just turning me into some stupid goomer, I want you to stop and make it go backward! Can you do that?"

She closed her eyes and hunched her shoulders. She made some little thinking noises. She shifted from side to side.

Then she opened her eyes. She tapped the tabletop with her hand. I put my hand on the table, and she touched my palm.

I can't guarantee I can return you to a pre-change state.

My mind startled up. Oh no. Forget it. Tell her to leave right now. She can find another rat.

It might already be too late for that.

But—huh? I didn't feel changed at all yet. I checked. I was still totally Kirby. As far as I could tell.

I will promise to stop whenever you ask me to, Vespa thought, and do my best to put wants back inside. You'll still be a little dif-ferent.

I took some deep breaths and let them out slowly. This was about the rest of my life. Even if we stopped tomorrow.

After a minute, I said, "Let's do it."

So it's been about a week.

So far what I notice is that it's easier to think. I'm not looking around all the time, distracting myself with thoughts about what I can't have.

I can still rent videos and choose clothes. I still hate green basic rations. I can still think about all the feelings I connect with wanting stuff and not being able to have it. I don't know. It's weird.

Everything happens in tiny pieces. I don't know if I'll know when to stop.

Maybe I won't care.