

Chimera

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The car stopped on the rain-soaked side street. Ancient oaks covered the road like a poorly maintained roof, making a dark day seem even darker. Gen checked the guidance system on her new Toyota. Everything seemed to be working properly. She peered through the water-streaked windshield and saw only twentieth-century farmhouses, lovingly restored and painted nice sedate colors—brown and tan and the occasional white. Not that the colors made much of a difference in this weather.

Sometimes it felt as if she were trapped in darkness, as if the gray netherworld of an Oregon winter would never end. Dr. Prichard wanted her to go to Hawaii or the southwest to soak up some light, but Gen felt as if she didn't deserve light—at least, not yet.

In her right hand, Gen still held the piece of paper Dr. Prichard had given her. The paper was crumpled now and the doctor's bold scrawl smeared. The paper hadn't been necessary. Dr. Prichard, at Gen's request, had had her computer send the address to Gen's car. But these days, Gen liked double and triple backups, especially those that could not be wiped out in an instant. Dr. Prichard said it was a reaction to the accident, a passing insecurity, brought on by Gen's heightened knowledge of the fragility of life.

She was shivering. The car had shut off, and the February chill was beginning to permeate the plush interior. The car's computer beeped. In another three minutes, it would beep again and then, in its polite androgynous voice, would ask if she wanted to leave the neighborhood. If she'd known when she bought the car that she had to inform it each time she just wanted to sit with all the systems off, she would have thought twice about buying it. But she hadn't discovered that feature until a week after the papers were signed. By then, it was too much hassle to take it back.

She glanced at the paper again. Part of the reason she was delaying was that she had expected a commercial neighborhood, or at least one that was part of a research park. She hadn't expected a residential street, not from Dr. Prichard's descriptions.

The other reason was harder to admit: She didn't want a companion, particularly not one that had been assigned to her. She had told Dr. Prichard that she would be perfectly fine living alone.

The car beeped a second time, but before the voice could make its request, Gen grabbed the door handle and let herself out.

The rain was cold. It came with a wind strong enough to make the drops slash her despite the canopy of trees. Her coat sealed at her wrists and waist, and a hood slipped over her head. She pushed the material back down. Not even her clothing allowed her to make her own choices any more.

The house at 2654 Rhododendron was a 1920s farmhouse like all the others, with a large front porch—now glassed in—and massive square columns on each side. The second story was smaller, and had vinyl windows from the last part of the previous century. The curtains were open. The net effect was to make the house look like a square face, with eyes that watched her.

She pushed a hand against her short, damp hair and stuck her hands in her pockets. Then she started up the old-fashioned concrete sidewalk, avoiding the cracks caused by age and weather.

The stairs groaned beneath her weight. When she reached the top, a voice asked her to state her name and her business.

"Gen O'Connell," she said, resisting the urge to turn and run back to her car. "I was sent by Dr. Prichard."

The house's computer system had to be an old one, because it took almost a minute to compare her waifish frame and delicate features to the identi-holo that Dr. Prichard had sent over. Then locks clicked back and the door swung open. Gen stepped into a porch that smelled faintly of cedar and dogs.

As the door closed behind her, the voice said, "You are wet. Hang your coat on the peg near the entry, and place your shoes on the grate. They will be dry when you return for them."

She did as she was told, even though her socks were damp too, and the polished hardwood floor was cold. Then the entry door opened, and she stepped into the heart of the house.

To her right, a staircase with real oak banisters wound its way to the second story. To her left, a large room filled with comfortable couches and easy chairs formed groupings that suggested intimacy. A gas fire burned in a far corner. The animal smell was stronger here, but not unpleasant. It mixed with the scent of fresh-baked bread and the strong, sweet scent of vanilla.

She saw no animals at all, and that surprised her. She expected them to be littering the place. When she had seen the house instead of the commercial building, her mind revised its image to a place overrun by creatures, living in their own filth, shedding everywhere. But this place was clean and well-tended.

A woman emerged from the archway beside the fireplace. She was stout but muscular, of an indeterminate age. Her hair was silver but her face unlined. Her eyes were a clear dark blue, her skin a soft coffee color. When she smiled, it warmed her already friendly features.

"So you're Gen O'Connell."

Gen threaded her fingers together. "Yes."

"I enjoyed your work. I saw you dance here before you left for New York."

The bright glare of the spotlight; the way it warmed her, made her feel beautiful and powerful. She would forget she was on stage, tilting her head back, letting her arms flow...

Gen winced. It was an involuntary reaction that she could no more prevent than the tears that lined her eyes. She made herself smile, though, and say, "Thank you."

"You were the most beautiful thing," the woman said, apparently oblivious to the distress her words caused. "I never believed humans could fly until I saw you."

"I don't fly any longer," Gen said.

The woman nodded. "Dance is such a cruel discipline, even with the modern enhancements. No matter how our technologies improve, our bodies still have limits."

"I never believed that," Gen said.

The woman looked at her measuringly. Gen swallowed. The tears threatened to spill. She shook her head slightly as if the movement could force the tears back into her tear ducts. Then she clutched her hands together, feeling the thin, fragile bones. "I'm sorry. I think Dr. Prichard was wrong. I'm not ready for this."

"You don't know until you try." The woman came closer. She smelled faintly of cinnamon and apples. She took Gen's twisting hands into her own. They were big and warm and soothing. "I'm Anna Capstik. Welcome to my home."

Gen closed her eyes. How long had it been since anyone had touched her? Since the accident, she'd turned away from hugs, stepped back from a friendly arm around her shoulder, and pretended not to notice an outstretched hand. But she didn't pull away from Anna.

Gen made her eyes open and nodded once. "Thank you," she said again.

"Come into the kitchen," Anna said. "Most of the animals will come out then."

"You don't have them somewhere else?"

Anna laughed. "You sound as if I can control them. They're as unruly as children." She squeezed Gen's hands and let go. "I do have some in isolation. They're so traumatized when they come here. The ones who have the run of the house are the ones that I'll adopt out."

Gen took a deep breath. "I'm still not sure—"

"Dr. Prichard is, though," Anna said. "Trust her. She makes wise decisions."

Gen nodded. She had had to trust all of her doctors after the accident. They had made a thousand decisions for her when she was unconscious: rebuilding her legs in ways that would still allow her to teach dance; growing her a new liver, new kidneys, and injecting stem cells into her heart. She always thought it ironic that they felt her heart needed repair, but they didn't grow her a new one. Perhaps if they had done that, she wouldn't have needed the counseling, wouldn't have had the nightmares, wouldn't have locked herself—

"Gen?" Anna was looking at her. "Are you all right?"

Gen nodded. "Nervous. The last time I cared for something..."

She didn't finish the sentence, but Anna knew. Everyone knew. Gen had been a celebrity who, when she retired from the stage, had come home to Portland. Her classes were world-renowned. Parents sent their little darlings to her to learn the finer points of ballet. Until nine months ago, she had gone on media interviews all over the world, had guest-instructed everywhere from New York to Beijing, and all the time she had used her influence to bring money and prestige to her own favorite city.

So the city was trying to give back now. Only it couldn't. No one could. Dar was dead.

She shuddered. She still couldn't see her son as anything except a crushed pile of bones, flesh, and blood, his skull shattered, his eye—

"Gen?" Anna asked again.

"I'm coming," Gen said.

Anna led her through a formal dining room with a picture window overlooking an enclosed yard. Someone had planted a flowering cherry tree outside so that it was perfectly centered with the window. Tulips and daffodils bloomed beneath the cherry tree, a reminder that spring always came early in Oregon.

A movement caught Gen's eye. She turned, saw a furry head duck behind a three-foot-high Delft vase positioned near the kitchen door.

"Move that, Cedric," Anna said, "and you'll be in trouble again."

There was no answering response from the hiding creature. Anna gave Gen a tiny smile and pushed open the swinging door.

The kitchen was warm. The bread smell was strong here. A small monkey with a white head perched on top of one of the vinyl chairs. Another hung from a swing near the ceiling. A group of mice huddled in an open aquarium, creating a rug of gray fur. She couldn't tell where one mouse began and another ended. Three cats sat on top of the refrigerator, and a dog lay on a cedar bed beside the stove.

They all watched her with wary eyes. She stared back at them. She had never seen chimera before. She hadn't known what to expect, really. All she knew was what Dr. Prichard had told her: Chimera had been around for twenty years. They were created for use in medical research by placing human embryonic stem cells in animal fetuses. The cells were then tweaked so that the animals would be useful subjects for medical testing. Dr. Prichard had said there were ethical considerations and debates over these procedures, but that they shouldn't concern her.

The Chimera Mission, which Anna ran, did its best to remain publicly neutral on the creation and use of chimera. That way, the Mission gained the cooperation of the medical research groups that created the animals.

The Mission prevented most chimera from being destroyed after the research was done. It was Anna who had pioneered the use of chimera in dealing with the traumatized, the mentally ill, and the unenhanced elderly. Anna's program was the first in the country, although several others had sprung up in the last decade. And all the studies had shown that chimera, when carefully matched to humans, were better at healing their owners than normal pets.

Initially, when Dr. Prichard had suggested that Gen care for something, she had turned her down. When she told Gen it was part of her therapy and therefore required, Gen asked to have a regular pet, not an altered one.

You're altered, Dr. Prichard had said. You need to understand how changes affect another creature.

Gen didn't want to know how changes affected anyone else. She already knew how they affected her.

"I've never had a pet," Gen said, shivering slightly under the impact of all those eyes. "I wouldn't know what to do."

"But you raised a child," Anna said softly.

Gen clenched her fists and then released them, just as Dr. Prichard had taught her. "Yes," she managed to say calmly. "I did."

But the child had died, mangled beyond recognition when the guidance system of a nine-year-old car failed and sent it careening through the streets at one hundred twenty miles an hour. Gen, the athlete, the dancer, the one with speed, had leapt out of the way. Dar hadn't.

If the car hadn't hit him, it wouldn't have spun and slammed into her. Even so, she remained conscious and had crawled to Dar. She had been cradling him when the paramedics finally pulled her away.

A long-haired cat walked under the swinging doors, hitting one with its bushy tail. It was brown, with a white collar and white paws. It looked at Gen with wide green eyes. Then it jumped onto the nearest chair, sitting with its front paws before it as if it were posing for an Egyptian statue.

"That vase better be in its usual position, Cedric," Anna said. "If I hear it crash in the next fifteen minutes, I'm going to blame you."

The cat ignored her, continuing to stare at Gen. This was the creature she had seen in the dining room. Still, Anna's comment made little sense. Gen gave her a perplexed look.

"Cedric sets traps for the other animals, so that they get blamed if something goes wrong. It pleases and entertains him." Anna frowned at him. "It annoys me."

Cedric tilted his face upward, holding Gen's gaze. He had a majestic bearing, a large ruff that made her think of a lion, and his features were classically feline. Yet there was something in his eyes she had never seen in a cat before, something measuring, something analytical.

"Dr. Prichard wanted you to have Sadie," Anna said, putting a hand carelessly on Cedric's head as she passed him. She crouched by the dog near the stove, and scratched her ears.

A dog. Gen's stomach clenched. She had never liked dogs. They were too boisterous and noisy, too needy and demanding. Although this one, enhanced as it was, might be different.

The dog, a tan Collie mix that was medium size, opened her brown eyes. They gazed up at Gen with such profound sadness that Gen's breath caught in her throat.

"Sadie had a single pup the year before she left the lab. She was raising it slowly, carefully, treating it as an infant long after any other dog would. The pup was taken from her at six months, sold to another lab that wanted to run experiments on second-generation chimera to see how much human DNA was in their systems. Sadie hasn't been the same since. Moaning, howling, throwing herself at doors. Then, when the director couldn't stand it any more, he called me. If I hadn't taken her, he would have put her down."

Anna said all of this in a dispassionate tone, as if outrage had long since left her emotional repertoire. The public might not know how the Chimera Mission felt about the treatment of chimera, but Gen thought it easy to know how Anna felt. She clearly hated it.

Gen crouched and extended her hand. Most dogs would have sniffed her fingers, and then licked them, but Sadie didn't. She gave Gen a long sorrowful look. The dog had lost a child and was miserable. Gen had lost a child and was miserable. What a pair they would make.

"I—" Gen stopped herself. She wasn't sure how much the dog understood. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Sadie is a good dog," Anna said. "She was used in pregnancy tests mostly, so the only enhanced part of her was her reproductive system. They removed that before giving her to me. She's going to be pretty normal."

For what? A human? Or did dogs mourn like that too? Gen had read about dogs that stayed by dead masters, guarding the bodies.

"I don't mean to be rude," Gen said. "But I can't."

She stood and her knees cracked. How long had it been since she had any exercise? Too long. Maybe a dog would be good, to run at her side, to cross streets in front of malfunctioning cars—

She shook her head and started away. Cedric stood on his chair, his paws dangling over the back. He was still staring at her.

Dr. Prichard had spent the last week stressing the importance of this animal adoption. It'll bring you back to the world, she'd said. You need something to care about besides the past.

Gen had heard the wisdom in those words, and that had pushed her this far. She glanced at Sadie, who hadn't moved. The dog was obviously depressed.

"Did Dr. Prichard see Sadie before choosing her?" Gen asked.

"No." Anna patted the dog's head once more, then stood. "She asked for histories of the patients and thought that Sadie might suit you best."

"Actually," Gen said, surprising herself, "I prefer Cedric."

The cat's head whipped toward Anna so fast that he nearly lost his balance.

"I don't think that's wise," Anna said.

"Dr. Prichard said I needed a companion and she sent me to you. She didn't judge the companions herself, but just made an educated guess. I don't think you can intellectualize attraction." She glanced at Cedric. He tilted that magnificent head toward her. It seemed as if he were surprised.

"Cedric is ..." Anna started, then let her voice trail off. "Come with me."

She headed toward the back door. Cedric ran ahead of them, winding himself in Anna's feet so that she tripped. She caught the doorjamb and bit back a curse. Cedric licked his side as if he had been the one who had been injured.

"Stay here," she said to him. Then she waited at the door for Gen. As they went out, Anna turned to make certain Cedric didn't follow.

The door led into a breezeway that had plants growing on either side. The breezeway was too warm, and it was a moment before Gen realized it was also a greenhouse. The plants looked healthy, bright green and loaded with flowers. Anna went to the far end, where a closed door warned against unauthorized entry. Anna opened the door, and the stench of sickness mixed with a medicinal sharpness greeted them.

Gen held her breath as she stepped inside. The light here was dim. Tiny beds,

a few cages, and some normal-sized upholstered furniture was scattered throughout the room. A steel operating table with a large lamp stood in the center, and several locked cabinets held vials of medicines. Animals lay on all the beds and a few huddled in their cages.

A man in a white coat was carefully brushing an afghan dog with large gray-looking bald spots on its back and sides. The dog cringed when it saw Anna and Gen.

"Take a look around," Anna said.

Gen did. The cats wouldn't meet her gaze. A parrot tried to bite her as she passed. Several rats growled at her, and one repeatedly launched itself against the padded walls of its little cell. Many of the animals had surgical scars all over their shaved bodies. One, a schnauzer, watched her with reddened, drugged eyes.

"These are the new animals. Some are unadoptable. Some we'll try to rehabilitate. But they've all been traumatized."

Gen extended her fingers to a rabbit that sat on a cushion at the back of a wide shelf. The rabbit made a small squealing noise and hid its face.

"I'm beginning to understand that," she said.

"I don't know if you do," Anna said. "Sometimes the sun comes out, and its warmth hits one of these animals, and the animal freaks. Another time, you might be singing, and all of the animals will try to hide. You never know what's going to set them off, and it isn't the same from day to day."

Gen was breathing through her mouth. She hated this smell, this hospital smell. It had been part of her life for five weeks. Five weeks, and every morning she woke with the knowledge that what had worked for her had failed for Dar.

Medical science, everyone said, had found a way to cure most diseases. Human beings could live longer than ever before, and be healthy while doing so. But medical science couldn't prevent all death. And it certainly couldn't prevent misery.

"You didn't bring me here to tell me about the things the animals have been through," Gen said. "You brought me here because of Cedric."

"I keep him in the house because he's too healthy to be out here. Physically healthy. Mentally—that's another story." Anna adjusted a blanket around a sleeping puppy. "You saw him trip me. That was deliberate. You had expressed an interest, and I was taking you away. He got angry and he wanted to hurt me."

"He's a cat," Gen said.

"No, he's not," Anna said. "He's a chimera, and you can't forget that. The researchers changed all of these animals, sometimes in ways none of us understand. I believed that Cedric is psycho—quite literally. I think he likes to hurt others for the pleasure of it, and I think he knows what he's doing."

"Then why do you keep him with the other animals?"

"He's only there in the daytime, and only when I'm with him. I'm a bit worried that he's alone with them right now. At night, I have a special cage for

him."

Gen's palms were wet. "You believe he's psycho. But you don't know."

"They messed with his mind," Anna said. "They used him to test drugs that were supposed to help with Parkinson's. That means that they enhanced his mind first to simulate a human brain, and then they tested drugs on him. No human would survive that."

"They altered his brain so that he can think?" Gen asked.

"We don't know," Anna said. "That's where this becomes tricky. We don't know a lot of the effects."

"What if I want him anyway? What if I say he's the only one I'll take?"

"I'd have to call Dr. Prichard."

Gen crossed her arms. "Do that."

Anna looked at her with surprise. "All right," she said. "But I hope to God she says no."

Gen didn't know what she had expected. Gratitude, perhaps. Not the screaming, hissing, spitting creature in the carrier wedged at an angle into the backseat. Cedric wrapped his paws around the wire door and slammed it back and forth as if he could open it through sheer force. Once, she turned around and watched as he lay on his back, placing one paw over the lever, and another under it. If he used the right amount of pressure the door would open. But he couldn't seem to get it; one paw kept slipping off.

She let the car drive itself home, and turned most of her attention to Cedric. But he batted at her and tried to bite her every time she reached for him. Finally, she decided that protecting her fingers was the better part of valor, and she merely talked to him the rest of the way home.

Anna had given her cat food, and a cedar bed for Cedric to sleep in. She also gave advice: give Cedric a special room all by himself, probably a bathroom, since he already knew how to use a toilet, and let him stay there until he got used to the house. She had given the instructions in a curt, almost dismissive manner, as if Gen had angered her by going against her advice.

Dr. Prichard had apparently told Anna that Gen needed a challenge. Even if things with Cedric didn't work out, it would take Gen's mind off her own problems.

Things would work out, no matter what they said. She wasn't going to let herself fail. Not again. Dr. Prichard had wanted her to make a commitment and she had, even if no one approved of it.

She could almost hear Dr. Prichard describe this in a session. You don't want to succeed, do you, Gen? You want to prove to me that you are no longer capable of intimacy, that you cannot take care of someone other than yourself. So instead of taking a sad and docile dog, you take a cat that wants to kill everything in sight.

Perhaps there was some validity to that. Perhaps. She certainly hadn't felt a powerful attraction to Cedric, despite what she had told Anna. She had, however, noticed him. He was the only one of the animals who even raised a bit of sympathy within her, and she wasn't sure why. Perhaps because Anna so



obviously disliked him. Perhaps because his eyes were the most expressive things Gen had ever seen. Perhaps because she knew, the moment she saw him, that he was an impossible creature who would prove her unworthy and end these futile therapy sessions once and for all.

The car pulled into the garage, and as the lights went off, she heard a small chirrup that indicated the house's security system was ready to receive her.

She lifted the cat carrier, feeling it shift beneath her hand. Her muscles were weak: she hadn't done any exercise besides the physical therapy since the accident. The squirming creature unbalanced the carrier, and made it twist against her already strained muscles.

The door opened, and she walked into her kitchen. It used to be her favorite room with its wide cooking area, oak cabinets, and matching oak table. She had fired her housekeeper months ago, unable to take the woman's chatter. The kitchen was filthy and the sour smell of two-day-old milk rotting in her breakfast bowls made her wince. She put the carrier on the fake wood floor, and went back to the car to get the food and the cedar bed.

She didn't want to put Cedric in the bathroom. That seemed inhumane. He had come to a new home, and they were going to get a new start. There were places she didn't want him, and she could get House to help with that. Before she let him out of the carrier, she would reprogram the computer to prevent him from entering Dar's bedroom. It remained as it was the day of the accident, with Dar's dirty clothes still on the floor, and the book they'd been reading on the end table beside the bed. She went to his room every day and peered inside, seeing it as a mute reproach for her own selfishness.

If she closed her eyes, she could see herself again—leaping away, not grabbing her child, not even thinking of him. Thinking only of herself.

Dr. Prichard tried to tell her that her memories were flawed, that she was ascribing motive where there could be none. But Dr. Prichard hadn't been there.

By the time Gen got back inside the house, she heard the cage door rattling. Cedric was still on his back, struggling with the lock.

"I'll get you out in a minute," she said. "There's a few things I have to do first."

She set the food by one of the kitchen cupboards, and carried the cedar bed into the master bedroom. She closed Dar's door, and used the hall keypad to program in the new instructions. Then she went back into the kitchen.

Cedric was on his stomach, his eyes glowing from the darkness of the cage. Gen remembered what she had learned, realized that all of them—the anonymous lab doctors, Anna, and herself—were in uncharted territory. She didn't know what kind of creature she had here. Just because it looked like a cat didn't mean it thought like one.

She sat in front of the cage and opened the door. Cedric skidded out, running faster than she had ever seen a creature move. He was across the kitchen floor and into the hallway before she had the door completely open.

He left a trail of bloody paw prints in his wake. The blood was fresh and red.

She looked at the wire on the door. "My god," she whispered. He had picked at

the lock until he had damaged his paws. Anna said she had caged him every night, and that Gen should do the same. Did he spend his nights on his back, attempting to use his paws like hands, trying to open a catch that had been designed to work only with fingers and thumbs?

She shuddered at the thought, then grabbed a roll of paper towels, and cleaned up the mess. The trail led her through the hall, to the closed door, and then to her bedroom.

Cedric was standing in front of the cedar bed, his tail down as he stared at the soft padded cushion. Gen had no idea how long he had been there. He didn't turn as she entered.

"It's yours," she said, crouching on an unbloodied bit of carpet. "You can sleep in here with me if you want."

He whipped his head toward her, that same sudden movement he had shown at Anna's house when Gen had said she was interested in him. His eyes seemed wider than they had before. If a cat could show surprise, he had.

"You injured your paws," she said. "I'd like to clean them."

As if in answer, he sat down and began licking his front paws himself. She watched the choreographed movement. His pads were bloody and the top part of the paws was missing some fur. The white was streaked brown with drying blood.

"Well," she said, "make yourself comfortable. I'll put out some food and water for you."

She felt a bit odd talking to a cat, but she reminded herself that he wasn't ordinary. He seemed to understand her. He paused as she spoke that last, and then continued licking as if her words meant nothing to him.

His licking was noisy and ostentatious. She stood slowly, gathering the dirty paper towels and sticking the roll under her arm, and went back to the kitchen. She found a dish, poured some cat food in it, and put out a bowl of water. Then she stacked her dirty dishes and put them in the washer.

Her entire body was shaking. She stopped after a few moments and gripped the edge of the sink. The work wasn't physically demanding, but it was so familiar, so domestic, that it hurt.

People used to go through this all the time. The loss of a loved one, sudden stark tragedy invading lives. When she had been a little girl, her grandfather had died of old age. She still remembered his soft, wrinkled skin, the age marks mottling his hands, his silver hair which had been so very thin that his scalp had been visible through it.

Except for the handful of Naturals—those who refused to change their looks despite the demands of fashion—no one allowed themselves to deteriorate any more. If a body part decayed, from the heart to the skin, it was repaired or replaced, most of the time without surgery. Exercise programs had become mandated by the government which, thanks to insurance lobbies, had been unwilling to pay for problems caused by inactivity. Serious illness still happened—although most could be controlled—and people still had an occasional cold, or a flu, or an injury caused by too much exercise. Those things were expected. Death was not.

She made herself take a deep breath, then splashed water onto her face. Dr.

Prichard's voice went through her head. Death is still expected, Gen. We're just not as used to it. No one knew the upper limits of the rejuvenated human body. Barring some irreparable setback (which often happened to the elderly who had been around long before the medical innovations became common), people were still jogging at a hundred and ten. A large section of the population was moving into the second decade of its second century with no immediate end in sight.

Water was dripping off her face into the sink. The unexpected nature of Dar's death, Dr. Prichard had said, combined with the trauma to her own body was creating a new world for her, a world in which people didn't live forever, and the strength she had taken for granted could be taken away from her in a heartbeat. Dr. Prichard had once said that what Gen was struggling with was the essence of being human.

She hated it. She hated it all. She shouldn't be listening to the doctors anymore. Maybe she should move, start all over again, in a place without memories.

A crunch behind her made her turn. Cedric was eating out of his bowl, his head bent, but his body alert. He had been a mistake, too. As much of a mistake as that pitiful dog would have been. She didn't want anyone else in her house. She didn't want her privacy disturbed by anyone. She didn't want to think about anyone else's welfare, especially when she had no control over it at all.

He drank as if he hadn't had water in weeks, then sat and stared at her. Those green eyes took in her wet face, her still shaking hands, and then perused the clean kitchen. He seemed to be waiting for something, but she didn't know what and she didn't know how to find out.

She walked past him and headed toward the closed door, thinking maybe she would sit in Dar's room. But when she reached the hallway, she realized she didn't want to go there. Instead she walked past it to the entertainment room.

Everything was covered in a fine coating of dust. She usually had House download her e-mail in the guest room, and she watched vid-net news from her bed when she felt like it. Lately she had been watching news on the Moon colonies as if it were designed for her. But she hadn't been in this part of the house, with its large holoviewer, its flat movie screen, and its games, since she'd come home from the hospital.

She sank into her leather chair, and immediately music came on: a Chopin sonata, the piano warm and beautiful and oh, so comforting. She had forgotten her music. How had she done that? She closed her eyes and leaned back, letting it flow through her, as it used to do.

Then she felt something soft brush against her arm. She opened her eyes. Cedric was sitting on the arm rest, his tail touching her, as if he were afraid he would get in trouble. When he saw her looking at him, he inclined his head slightly. She patted her lap, but he didn't crawl in it.

She closed her eyes again. The music ebbed and flowed, like the tide, like passion, and, after a while, she felt Cedric's tail wrap gently around her wrist.

He woke her in the middle of the night, yowling and running through the house. She sat up in bed, just as he vaulted across it. His hind paws caught her right arm, scratching her so deep that she cried out in pain. But he didn't

seem to notice. He was running like a demented thing, screaming as he did so, disappearing down the hall, and then coming back at full speed.

She turned on the bedside lamp and examined the scratch. It ran along her forearm, deep and bleeding. The pain was just as deep and constant, but nothing like the pain she had endured only a few months ago. She sighed, got out of bed, and went into the bathroom to cleanse and seal the wound.

Cedric yowled past once more, his long brown hair trailing behind him. He ran like a creature pursued by unseen demons. No wonder Anna kept him caged at night. He would have disturbed the other animals tremendously.

But there was only Gen here, and she didn't mind having her sleep interrupted. She had been dreaming of the accident anyway, like she always did, the moments just before impact as she turned her head and saw the car careening down the street. In her dreams, she would remind herself: Get Dar. Get Dar. But she could never find him. And then the car would hit them anyway before skidding to the side.

The dream was not how she remembered things. But then, dreams never were.

The pain in her arm had eased. She stepped out of the bathroom, and turned on the hall light. Cedric skidded to a stop and then froze.

It was as if the muted hall light had the effect of a spotlight, illuminating him and revealing him at the same time.

He looked terrified. The fur on his back stood on end, his tail was swollen, and his eyes were enormous. She sat down on the carpet and held her hand out to him.

His gaze went to the scratch on her arm. She glanced down at it, touched it gingerly, and said, "It's all right. I medicated it."

His little body shivered, and his gaze came back to her face. Those were his only movements. He remained frozen, crouched, protected, on the floor of the hall.

She sat across from him, arm outstretched for a long time. Finally, he sighed and stretched out on the brown carpet. Strange. Either her presence or the light itself had calmed him. His breathing was even long before his eyes closed.

She remained in position for a while, watching him sleep. Even now, he didn't look like he was rested. He seemed like he would spring to his feet at the slightest sound.

Her arm tingled. It had fallen asleep. Slowly she brought it back and massaged it, wondering if she should pick up the sleeping creature and carry him to his cedar bed. He hadn't slept there, though, hadn't even stepped in it. Maybe he didn't like it, and after the cage experience, she didn't want to force him into something he didn't like. She waiting until the feeling returned to her arm, and then stood slowly, careful not to wake Cedric.

She went back to bed, but left the hall light on.

. . . . .

The following morning, after she had shared her breakfast with a tired Cedric, she had gone into her office. Papers were scattered on tables and on her desk. Old papers, copies of things that should have been recycled long ago. House had left her work station running, even though she hadn't touched it for months. Her ergonomically designed work chair no longer fit her body. She moved it aside and pulled over a wooden chair that she once stacked information cubes on.

She had left the office door open, but Cedric hadn't followed her inside. Which was good. If he could understand what she said—and she was becoming more and more convinced that he could—she didn't want him to hear this next conversation.

She had House locate and dial the Chimera Mission. Anna answered and switched to holo when she realized that Gen was on the line.

"Problems?" Anna asked as if she had been expecting this call.

Gen had carefully worn a long-sleeved shirt so that no one would see the injury Cedric had given her. "No. He seems pretty well behaved."

"He's not used to his surroundings yet," Anna said. "Wait until he gets comfortable."

Gen swallowed back her next question. She was going to ask what he would do once he was comfortable, but she didn't want Anna's attitude toward Cedric to poison her mind any farther.

"Was he adopted before?" Gen asked.

"No," Anna said. "We had him listed as borderline unadoptable. I'm still not sure about you taking him."

Gen ignored that as well. "Could you tell me again what they did to him?"

"I told you all I know," Anna said. "Brain enhancement. Drugs for Parkinson's, I think. But that's all. I only know what they tell me."

"Is there anyone who knows exactly what happened to him?"

"Why?" Anna asked.

Gen thought of Cedric's face as he tore through the rooms in the near darkness. The sheer terror called to her. She had lain in bed after he fell asleep and wondered if Dar had felt that kind of terror in the seconds before he died.

"I think," she said carefully, "some of his quirks are explainable. If I just understand what happened to him, then I might be able to handle him better."

"I'm sorry I can't help you any more," Anna said, sounding not sorry at all.

Gen sat straight in her chair. She cleared her throat and clutched her desk so that her shaking hands couldn't be seen by House's holocam. "Actually," she said with a power in her voice she hadn't had in a long time, "you can help me."

Anna looked startled. Most people didn't expect Gen—the wispy dancer they had once seen on stage—to be formidable. "How?"

"You can tell me which lab to talk to."

Anna was shaking her head before Gen finished her sentence. "The labs don't discuss their work with outsiders."

Dr. Prichard had tried to warn her about that too. Apparently, several organizations, including People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the Christian Right, had been fighting for the last two decades to stop the creation of chimera. PETA believed that chimera violated the rights of animals, and the Christians believed that they violated the laws of God. Several militant sides of both groups burned labs where chimera were used, or freed chimera to live in the wild. Both tactics caused more chimera to die than the laboratory experiments did.

"I don't care about the work," Gen said. "I just want to know about Cedric. I think I'm entitled."

Anna pursed her lips. Finally, she said, "I'll see what I can do." and hung up.

Gen leaned back in her chair. The conversation had taken more out of her than she expected. But for a brief moment, she felt like she used to when she was running her dance school, when someone told her something was impossible. She would laugh at them and say: "I am a ballet dancer. I specialize in the impossible."

Where had that attitude gone? It used to be built into her, as deep as her bones. When the spotlight was on her, she never questioned herself or her abilities.

She just danced.

She sighed and stood. Cedric was sitting in the doorway. When he saw her, he ran away.

. . . . .

Gen didn't look for Cedric. She felt he was entitled to privacy if he wanted it. But as she went through her day, this time straightening the entertainment room while listening to Beethoven's Seventh, she kept an eye out for him. He reappeared at dinner, sitting in the chair beside her, looking at the table as if he expected to be served. She was eating a medium-rare steak that she'd broiled, and a baked potato with nothing on it. Steaks had been dinner too many nights; there had been dozens in the freezer for a party she had been planning to throw around Christmas. They were easy to fix and phenomenally bad for her. She had never before been one of those people who figured she could eat what she wanted and medical science would repair the damage for her. But she was one now.

She cut a small piece off the steak, and debated placing it on the floor as she would have done for any other animal. In the end she compromised, and placed the steak on the chair. Cedric ignored it for a long time, then tried to scoop it up with his left paw. When that didn't work, he ate it as he had eaten the cat food, his posture awkward.

The piece finished, he jumped off the chair and left the room, behavior she believed not to be catlike at all. A cat would continue begging. Cedric wasn't pure cat. She had to remember that.

He woke her again that night by running and howling, although he didn't scratch her this time. He was careful to avoid the bed altogether. This time, she calmed him by turning on all the lights. Lights seemed so very important to him. He didn't have these spells in the daytime, only in the darkness.

She caught him when he froze and put him in his cedar bed, which he didn't seem to mind after all. She had House create a nightlight for him, and he slept soundly until dawn.

She didn't. After his adventure, she lay awake, wondering what would trigger such behavior, and why he would tremble so violently when she scooped him into her arms.

She got her answer one day later.

Anna called her back, reporting that the lab wouldn't talk to her, but one of the scientists who had worked with Cedric would.

The arranged meeting was like something out of a turn-of-the-century spy movie. Anna insisted that Gen meet her first at a restaurant that Anna frequented. Once there, Anna gave Gen handwritten instructions on how to find the scientist.

The directions took her to a concrete parking garage that was almost a hundred years old and had been condemned by the city. A closed coffee shop on the sidewalk level matched the number on the slip of paper. Gen gingerly tried the door, and was surprised to find it open. She slipped inside.

"Lock it," a woman's voice said.

Gen turned the deadbolt.

"Come on back."

Gen walked around the empty tables, past the steel counters and empty mugs, ancient espresso and cappuccino machines which still smelled faintly of coffee. A light burned in a back office, not visible from the street. Gen went inside.

The woman waiting for her was slight and trim, but she wore a thick protection vest and pants. On the desk in front of her was a laser pistol. Her hand rested on its butt.

Gen turned cold, but it was too late to back out now. "Hi," she said, hearing how inane the word sounded in this empty place. "Anna sent me. From the Chimera Mission. I'm—"

"I know," the woman said. "I have season tickets to the Portland Ballet. Have for years."

She moved her hand off the gun. "Sorry for the protection. We never know what types we're going to run into."

The stories of PETA and the conservative Christians came back to Gen. Were their assaults so severe that the lab workers had to take these kinds of precautions?

"I'm Moya," the woman said.

Gen took the only available chair. "Call me Gen."

"Gen." Moya tried it as she would a new dress.

"Anna tells me you worked with Cedric?"

"Look," Moya said. "I heard about you. I'm sorry for what happened to you, but you gotta know that the reason you're walking, hell, the reason you're even breathing is because of the work we do. You got to dance until the age of forty, and you could have gone longer because of our research. But you quit to have a baby, by yourself, and it was easy, not like it was fifty years ago for a first-timer your age, so before you go into the ethics of creating chimera, you got to remember how much benefit you've taken from them."

Gen took a deep breath. "I didn't come here to yell at you. I came to find out what happened to Cedric."

"What happened to him? He was in our lab until the experiment expired. Then I gave him to Anna for the Mission."

"He's violent," Gen said. "And he has night terrors, or so it seems to me. Anna said he was part of an experiment for Parkinson's—"

"Alzheimer's." Moya looked down. "A lot of the old folk had such poor medical care and nutrition when they were kids. They're still developing Alzheimer's. We can hold it off until they're a hundred or so, but with the lifestyle changes, they might live another twenty years. That's a burden on the families. We can slow the progression of the disease, but we haven't been able to stop it. Not yet."

"Cedric has Alzheimer's?"

"No." Moya sighed. "Cedric was a control. We used stem cells to give him the closest thing we could to a human brain, and then we tested our latest drugs on him. I can't tell you more than that."

"What did the drugs do?"

"Enhanced memory. Increased certain types of chemicals. Helped fortify connections between different parts of the brain. Some of the drugs failed. A few didn't. But drugs are iffy things. They can alter personality in humans. Cedric isn't human and he's not exactly feline. He became too erratic to work with, so we were supposed to put him down." Moya shrugged. "I don't believe in doing that."

She said that last very softly, and Gen understood where many of Anna's animals came from.

"Why do you think he became erratic?" Gen asked.

"I didn't have a chance to study him," Moya said. "He began to hate his cage, and he would attack anyone he didn't know. He hid on us a lot, and wouldn't let us find him until after testing times. He became difficult. I wanted to keep him on the study, but the team decided he was a hazard."

"How old is he?" Gen asked.



"About two."

Gen nodded. Then she straightened her shoulders before she asked the difficult question, the one that might make her seem like a fool. "Do you think that he thinks like a human? I mean, he has an enhanced brain, and you designed it to be like a person's."

"That was my argument. Hiding. Tantrums. Not knowing limits. It seemed to me like he was an out-of-control child. But the others wouldn't hear of it." Moya traced the barrel of the pistol with one finger. "Think of it. If it were true, if Cedric had developed a human mind, then what were we doing to him? We were as bad as those pro-lifers said we were. We're worse than PETA makes us out to be. We're real monsters."

Gen had no response. Her dance work had always seemed cut-and-dried. Elegant solutions without ethical considerations, not even in the fund-raising work. She didn't know what she would do if she were told her work would benefit millions of people, but to do it, she had to irreparably damage fifty innocents.

"Do you think Cedric can understand speech?" Gen asked.

Moya stopped tracing the barrel. "Yes, but he'll never be able to talk back to you, not in English anyway. His mouth isn't designed for it."

"But he could learn to understand a language."

"Probably," Moya said. "Cats have a twenty-one-sound vocabulary and seem to have a small verbal language. If we accidentally enhanced that even a little, he would probably be able to communicate with you quite well."

The words hung between them for a moment. Then Gen said, "Do you have any idea what's causing his night terrors?"

"A guess," Moya said. "We fine-tuned his memory. You and I, we remember only certain events, but he probably remembers every single thing that happened to him. Every moment of every day."

"Why would that scare him so?" Gen asked.

Moya stared at her. "I think it would be awful not to be able to forget anything, don't you?"

Gen let out a small breath. She knew what it was like. If she could forget the accident, she would. If she could forget how Dar looked on the pavement, crumpled and broken, she would. She remembered other things about him, just not as strongly as that last moment.

Was that how Cedric thought? Were the painful things stronger than the pleasant ones? Or had he had so few pleasant experiences in his life that he didn't even understand what they were?

Moya picked up the pistol and turned it over in her hands. "Do you know what chimera originally meant?"

"No," Gen said.

"In Greek mythology, it was a fire-breathing monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. That was probably how those first biogenetic engineers started calling the hybrids we experiment with chimera.

But when I started work with chimera my second year at Oregon State, I asked my computer what the term meant." She paused, and met Gen's gaze. "The definition I got was 'grotesque monster.' "

Gen waited. She wasn't sure how this related to Cedric's night terrors.

"Grotesque monster." Moya shook her head. "Sometimes I would look at Cedric and the other animals I worked with, and I would wonder which one of us were the real monsters. I think of some of the things I did--still do--and I realize I don't want to know."

"Anna thinks I shouldn't keep him. She believes I shouldn't have taken him in the first place."

"Anna's a kind-hearted woman who has seen a lot of pain and death." Moya pushed her chair back. It squealed against the concrete floor. "She tries to heal people and chimera. What she doesn't realize is how damage really works. Let's take you, for example. Those famous legs of yours are as good as they've always been, despite the destruction the car did to them."

Gen sat very still. Her legs tingled at the mention. She clenched her fists, dropping them to her side.

"But they're not the same legs you had before. No damage remains, but your legs are changed. They may be genetically similar, they might even be regrown legs from your DNA, but they are not the legs you were born with, and never will be again. All that exercise, all that muscle training, it's gone. Your legs are different, and there's nothing you can do about that."

Moya glanced at Gen's clenched hands, then back at Gen's eyes. Gen had frozen in her seat, like Cedric did when she made the darkness disappear.

"Healing is not the process of returning things to the way they were before. It's the acceptance of things the way they are now." Moya smiled ruefully. "Sometimes I think that's the biggest problem we created with our work. We created an expectation that everything will remain the same. It never does. No matter how much we want it to. It never does."

. . . . .

Gen felt numb as she stepped out of the shop, looking both ways as Moya told her to. Moya had been worried about snipers; apparently attacks on chimera scientists were so common they weren't reported any more. But no one took a shot at Gen, and she had gone half a block before she realized she was walking away from her car. She wasn't thinking. Her mind was preoccupied. It was as if parts of her had been cut off from the rest. She recognized this feeling; it had been with her in the first months after the accident.

When she finally got into the car, she hit a preprogrammed route home. The car took her down side streets, past the rivers and Portland's famous bridges. Her stomach clenched as the scenery grew more and more familiar. The scenery of her dreams.

She ordered the car to stop on Burnside. It pulled over, and she got out.

Her legs wobbled. She was nauseous and dizzy at the same time. But she went forward. Around the corner was Dar's favorite playground, in what had once been a brewery. The sky was grayer than it had been before, as gray as it had been that day.

She stopped at the crosswalk, looked down the empty street. In her mind, it wasn't empty at all. The car—blue and gold, without a driver—careened around the corner, bounced off the curb, and kept coming. She had one foot in the intersection. Dar was pulling her across.

The car hit them both and she went flying—above everything, spotlight on her, the world watching—like she had been when she leaped on stage. Only on a stage, someone always caught her. Someone caught her and held her up and twirled her while she arched her back and kept her toes en pointe.

But there was no one to catch her now. And when she looked down, on that agonizingly long flight, she saw Dar, crumpled, destroyed, bleeding, and she knew that she should have brought him with her, brought him into the air, where it was safe.

It was safe.

And then she landed.

Gen leaned against the edge of the building, the nausea so strong that she had to breathe deeply to hold it back. The second hit had happened, but not in the way she remembered it. She had been flying, she landed, and then the car spun into her.

And still she had crawled toward Dar.

. . . . .

Somehow she found her way to her own car. Somehow it got her home. When she entered the house, Cedric was sitting near the door, his back to her. She scooped him up and cradled him like a child, ignoring his squirming, holding him close. She carried him with her into the bedroom, and lay on the bed. He slipped out of her arms, stood uncertainly for a moment, then lay down beside her, not touching her. He wasn't a child. She knew that. He wasn't a child and he wasn't a kitten; he wasn't human and he wasn't a cat.

He was, by definition, a grotesque monster.

But only because of things that had been done to him, not because of things he had done to himself.

They weren't that different, he and she. She was a grotesque monster too, with enhancements and parts she had never been born with. She and Cedric were bound—not by loss, as Dr. Prichard had wanted Gen to bind with that dog, but by night terrors and mistrust and a conviction that life wasn't going the way that it should.

She petted Cedric's side, smoothing his fur. After a moment, he sighed, and eased closer to her, his feline face upturned toward the light.

Life hadn't gone the way it should have, and nothing would change that. No

matter what she did, nothing would change that moment when Dar's hand slipped from hers. Life was different now. And, like Cedric, she had come out of a deep darkness.

It had taken her a long time, but she was finally ready. Ready to turn her face toward the light.

The End