

The sound of collapsing edifices and muddled hollering vibrated through the second story floor and buzzed her feet. Rising from her haunches, Jezebel head butted the door open and entered her room.

Through the window – which was open a couple of inches, as Jezebel preferred – and against dusk’s fading, mauve tone, was motion in the leaves. A bird.

She soundlessly crept across the carpet with her lime green eyes nailed on her prey. The bird flittered, then pecked at an insect on the bark. As she had done many times, Jezebel coiled beneath the window sill, chose her moment, then leapt at the pane.

But, as her forepaws struck the glass, the bird’s perch quivered, empty.

She thumped down on all fours and blanched at the new, jagged fissure in the window pane. “Holy snot cakes!” Her recent growth spurt must have intensified the force of her blow.

She hooked one of the curtains with her claws and tugged it across the window to hide the damage. But, instead of sliding across the rod, its rings snagged.

“Come on, you,” she yanked, unexpectedly tearing the bracket from the wall. The curtain’s lavender, velvet bulk frumpled down and the curtain rod jounced against the floor. Its metal end scratched the floral wallpaper.

Horrified, Jezebel sprang behind the open trunk, which – lined with blankets – functioned as her bed, and gazed, wild-eyed at the new monster heaped on the floor. Despite her consternation, her rump twitched and tail lashed. With distended claws, she charged the velvet creature, to bite and dig at it in a frenzy.

The bedroom door swung suddenly inward and pounded its rubber stopper. “Whaz goin’ on? I almoz fell on yur stupid ball.”

Slurred words, poor pitch control – drunk.

In dingy slippers Mom stomped toward the window, wafting gin vapors. “Oh my God, what’d shyou do?”

“I-I didn’t mean to...,” Jezebel backed away from the curtain.

Mom’s blotchy face pinched with rage, “Broke the window too! You...” for an instant, her mouth twisted over an unspoken cuss word, “...geddin the closet. Now!”

Beneath her mother’s glare, Jezebel slunk toward her door. The airless linen closet was in the hallway, just outside her bedroom. Her mother followed, whipping her stained bathrobe closed and muttering from on high, “Stop being an animal.”

While that insult had been spoken more times than she could count, this time something in Jezebel snapped. She bounded past the closet door and surged downstairs, skittered across the kitchen tiles and burst through the pet door’s hanging flap, into the back yard. This is it, she thought, gathering speed, to try to scurry her slightly larger self up the six foot high wood fence. She had never attempted it.

“Jezzz!” her mother screamed from her bedroom window, “Get, back, here, thizinstant!” She slammed it shut, despite Jezebel’s frequent requests to keep it open.

Furious at this additional punishment, she sprang and clambered up the fence’s weathered boards in a chittering, clawed hustle, and made it! She minced along the narrow top beam to the far corner – the boundary of her small outdoor space. On both sides were the other town homes’ identically fenced yards. But, straight ahead was the marshy, undeveloped forest.

The first story laundry door, which Jezebel had exited, whammed open. “Damn it, Jez!” Her mother’s engorged face jerked about, searching the neglected garden.

Before her hard brown eyes fastened on her, Jezebel had jumped down and darted into the dark wood.

#

After following several sunsets, hiding when vehicles passed, scrambling for shelter as ‘copters shuddered the sky – Jezebel was scared, but felt more alive than ever. Yet, running on the scant protein from crickets and daddy long legs, she was very hungry.

She chased a mole that kept eluding her diving under the crinkly leaves. Then, she came upon a clearing in the wood – the silvery moonlight illuminated an abandoned neighborhood. Crumbling houses were parked in scraggly yards which were divvied up by spans of cracked pavement, broken up by saplings and weeds. It was one of the cast-off developments that she'd only heard about on the news. As pestilence and climate change disasters claimed more human lives, no one had wanted to live in the out-of-date residences, far from the city.

An owl screeched in a nearby copse of trees, while distant airplanes tore across the sky – even there, their jarring notes were inescapable. However, they were omnipresent in her old, urban neighborhood.

In the end, will Mom find me? Drag me back there – to my pastel prison?

Her father had left after her birth, exclaiming, “I can’t live with that freak!” She knows this because when drunk or semi-conscious, her mother would utter his hateful words, then curse him as a coward and complain about raising Jezebel alone.

A week ago, Mom had explained to an unknown relative on the phone that her desperation to have a child, to “keep us together,” had made the costly experimental drugs seem worth it. The conversation was during a rare moment of sobriety – Jezebel had resented that her mother had chosen not to spend it with her daughter.

Mom had chanted the drug commercial's log line: ‘A cure, to fill our empty nurseries and mend broken hearts,’ as if it were a curse. While pregnant, she'd been too preoccupied with her tumultuous marital relationship to attend health checks – or so she had claimed. The other person had argued against her every point. Crying at the end of the contentious call, Mom had reached for the bottle, breaking two days of abstinence.

Hoping for some kind of connection, even a sorrowful one, Jezebel had eavesdropped. Once the call was over, the clank of the glass and bottle demolished her hope. Instead of staying for the dreadful glugging sound, she had fled to grieve alone in the back yard.

The story goes that a small percentage of the fertility drug's gene splice components were from

captive animals – a horrible mistake or sabotage. When the first “splicies” were born, the company that sold the drug was shut down. But, the black market mixed those drugs with others and repackaged them with new names, claiming that they were, better than those overseen by the corrupt FDA.

The government's failure to protect its citizens during the Collapse, followed by their cover-ups and excuses, had proven its untrustworthiness. Instead, people used underground networks for healthcare – Mom did.

The cell division caused by the tainted drugs only rebelled in the final stages of fetal development. On discovery, many late-term abortions were performed, but not every woman had access to the difficult procedure. That the only visible signs of humanity in the “splicies” were faces, in animal bodies was an abomination and a reproach. Religious and ethical infighting followed. But, there was a small, vocal group, mockingly called the “splicie cuddlers,” that argued that the chimeras deserved loving homes. They were ostracized – Mother should know. Despite her intentions to make a loving home, being twice abandoned was too much. So she turned to alcohol.

Something rustled beyond the corner of a dilapidated house, ten yards away.

Jezebel's fur bristled, and she arched her back.

A breeze crumbled scree and twigs across the boarder between the dwelling's shadow and the moonlight. The debris were stirred by the striped paws of a cat with a human face – a tabby chimera! Its smooth, feminine voice called to her, “It's okay.”

Dumbfounded by seeing another of her kind, Jezebel maintained her threatening arch.

Behind her were louder stirrings – a huge German Shepard with a golden mane and dark, flat face – a dog chimera!

Screeching, Jezebel shifted the profile of her fuzzy arch sideways to intimidate the newcomer.

Ignoring her, it growled, masculine and jaded, “Another spy. She'll report us to the Makers.” He hunkered down, as if to spring on Jezebel.

“No,” Jezebel gasped. “I'm no spy – I ran away.”

“Hear that,” the tabby had sauntered nearer and scratched the back of her head with a fluttering hind leg. Itch relieved, she continued to the dog, “Look at her. She’s a kit – not first generation, like us.”

“Makes no difference.” The dog shook, with a great twisting and flapping of his ears and pelt.

Jezebel vented, “Ree – oww!”

Snarling at her, he retorted to the tabby, “Those pee-pole want us dead.”

The tabby’s answer was nonchalant, “Then, inspect.”

While the fearsome dog brushed Jezebel to one side, then another with his paw tipped with thick, blunt nails, the tabby came up and assured Jezebel, “Don’t worry, he won’t hurt you.”

Jezebel refrained from lashing out or screeching.

“Roll over,” he barked.

She reluctantly did – exposing her white-patched belly.

With delicate taps on her abdomen, he determined that she wore nothing, no collar, bugs or other devices. He snorted his completion of the search.

Jezebel scrambled to her feet, then staggered. There were several more chimeras gathered around – cats, long-haired and short, an ivory poodle and a black Labrador.

“So many, I thought...,” Jezebel trailed off.

“That you were the only one around here?”

The tabby regarded Jezebel kindly, “What’s your name, kit?”

“Jezebel.” Glaring at the dog, “What’s yours?”

The dog huffed at her audacity.

“Cedrick’s his name,” the tabby replied for him, “and I’m Ankh.” With a sardonic grin, she added, “the appointed leader of Furtown.” The olive complexioned skin of her face had tabby markings around the eyes – an Egyptian flair.

Jezebel found herself wheedling, “Oh please, can I stay with you?” She paused, then stated, “Humans...ah, the Makers are mean.”

Sharing her rejection, the chimeras meowed or scoffed empathetically.

Signing, Ankh said, “In their eyes, we blur the line between children and pets. Raising us was too emotionally hard.”

With a final look at Cedrick, whose pointed ears were flattened against his head, perhaps at a remembered trauma, Ankh trilled, “Yes, Jezebel, you can stay with us.”

#

Thus, Jezebel became the youngest member of Furtown. Starved for love, she quickly established relationships with its occupants, and fell into the cautious rhythm of the place. Though their valley seemed remote from the Makers, avoiding detection from outsiders dictated the manner in which they did everything.

Chimeras’ animal genes determined their growth rate, so at five months old, Jezebel’s development was comparable to a human preteen, considered too young to participate in Furtown’s nightly hunting parties. But, she was given a guard shift – the first couple of hours after dawn – and cleaning duties.

Though she craved Ankh’s company as a savvy mother figure, the leader was in frequent conferences with her security officer, Cedrick, who wouldn’t shed his wariness toward Jezebel. Instead, she bonded with Ricky, Melody, Lizt and Cleo – the other cats. After Jezebel learned to relax around the big, rambunctious dog, Georgie the Labrador also became a friend.

But, Pierre, the poodle, remained aloof. It was told that he was horribly abused and suffered from melancholy. Jezebel proceeded gently with him. After a couple of weeks, even he was amused by her antics and once, wordlessly shared a crayfish delicacy with her.

Given their human noses and mouths, the splicies had peculiar dietary needs – meat must be shred and preferably, cooked, unlike how the domestic animals that they resembled eat. Also, despite their intelligence, they lacked hands. Without the dexterity and industry of the Makers, their ingenuity was constantly challenged.

Nevertheless, after a month in the defunct homes with her new companions, Jezebel was en-

joying herself more than she had dreamed possible.

In the meantime, Furtown took in two more refugees: Penny, a black cat and Jasper, a beagle, which brought their number to eleven.

#

After completing her watch on a snowy day, Jezebel had just eaten breakfast with the others, and had gone to a bedroom window to meditate on the flakes sprinkling over the slowly thickening white layer. Then, the alarm was sounded by the late morning shift – a mimicked Screech Owl call, a double rattle, a rest, and a final shake of a designated holly tree branch.

She dashed to the living room.

Cedrick and Ankh had gone outside. In the kitchen and adjoining living room, the others whispered in the dusty air and peeped through the windows, for a signal as to whether they should flee or remain hidden.

Jezebel shared the kitchen window ledge with Melody, a calico, and Lizt, a Himalayan. Upon first glance between the slats of the dented blinds, she almost fell off.

Makers, and not just the derelict teens who occasionally pass – adults! Dressed in parkas, knit hats, and snow boots, seven people fanned out through Furtown, looking into windows with flashlights and trying locked doors.

Lizt's voluminous fur puffed out around his tan, blue-eyed face, doubling his size. He moaned, "they're searching for us."

Blinking her bi-colored eyes – one amber and one green, Melody reminded, "Last watch just swept our snow tracks." Indeed, only the treaded, oblong craters from the humans' boots marked their passage through four inches of snow.

Jezebel stared at a broadly made woman with inwardly rotated arms, so that her curled, gloved fingers stuck out. She heavily followed the others.

"It's Mom," Jezebel quavered, hunkering onto the counter, to one side of the sill. "Could she have traced me?"

Lizt also stepped down to the counter. "My father's at the head of group."

Jezebel had seen a Southeast Asian man, with a salt and pepper beard leading them.

Awed, he continued, "And I've been here much longer than you."

"Oh, God. Are they all our family?"

"I see none of mine," Melody replied, with her tri-colored, patched self balanced on the sill.

After assessing the entire neighborhood, the people zeroed in on the house that the splicies occupied – it had the least amount of structural damage. To everyone's alarm, Lizt's father thumped up their front steps and put a small parcel down. Then, he signaled to the others, and mumbling, the group plodded back the way they came. Five minutes later, they were gone.

#

According to the correspondence they left, the Makers didn't want to abduct the residents. To make up for poor treatment, they offered support – to send supplies, to repair portions of Furtown, to have doctors come and check on the chimeras, along with occasional family visits. Despite their own straits, they had pooled their funds to implement the changes. They were acting like Mom's old group, the "splicie cuddlers." But, could they be trusted?

Furtown's residents were unnerved. After gathering their thoughts for a bit, they had a meeting.

Cedrick, Melody, Pierre and Cleo wanted run away, before they were captured.

On the other hand, Jezebel, after experiencing the drama of her first heat cycle, was inclined to accept, particularly for the doctor visits. Her mother had said that reproducing splicies would be a disaster. Ricky, a black and white first generation cat with arthritis, also desired medical care. Georgie, the homesick Labrador, could barely contain her glee at the thought of the visits, and Jasper; the newly arrived beagle, wanted the sagging, holey roofs and moldy wallboards repaired.

The views of Lizt, Penny and most importantly, Ankh, were somewhere in the middle. Penny thought they should leave, but then keep watch on Furtown, to see if the Makers did what they prom-

ised. Litz kept shaking his chocolate ruff and muttering that what they needed from the Makers was a token – something of value, to convince them of their sincerity. Ankh agreed, but felt that asking for such would put them at a strategic disadvantage.

Jezebel couldn't help fidgeting. She dreaded seeing her mother, but was sure that the feeling was mutual. No doubt, Mom had been relieved that Jezebel's demands and hassles had ended, at least under her roof. While Jezebel understood all the views that were expressed, she hung on the vision of what the Makers could provide: comfort and stability, medical care. She had expressed that twice at the beginning.

Sighing, she flung out a piece of string between her fore-claws like a fisher's net, only to pull back dust bunnies and linoleum tile shards. Night was drawing close and she was getting hungry. What would they do?

During a brief hush, Ankh's soft statement filled the room, "Penny's plan is the best."

The black cat blinked her deep green eyes and ducked her head.

Satisfied, Cedrick nodded.

Ankh continued, "It's a way to test the Makers at keeping their word, with minimal risk. We'll move to the caves, send regular scouts and see what they do."

While the circle broke up, Jezebel asked Litz, "What are the caves like?"

With a curled lip, he replied, "Unpleasant."

#

Litz was right about the caves. In the foothills along the river, a couple of miles from Furtown, they were more like animal burrows than the stalactite braced cathedrals which Jezebel hoped for. Even with blankets and pillows, there was no helping the dank, cold environs and low, dripping ceiling. Without electricity in Furtown, they still could cook on a stove with a copious propane tank and matches. But, in the caves, the matches wouldn't light without the gas burners – they only bent and broke after repeated tries.

Thus, Ankh ordered that meals be stealthily made at Furtown at night and delivered to the

caves. The volunteer cooks went in alternating teams – either Pierre and Melody or Georgie and Penny – the cats did the dexterous work, while the dogs toted bags of cooked rations on their backs, tied with string. Meanwhile, Cedrick scouted ahead and stood watch, while they prepared the food. Like that, they could only bring half of the normal amount of chow.

Jezebel tried to convince the group to eat insects like she had, but that idea was met without enthusiasm.

Then the Makers dropped off a huge carton of not just food, but tools which the chimeras could use with paws and teeth: long stemmed, push-button lighters, water jugs with pull tab caps, push-bottles of antiseptic soap and an easily used can opener. It was apparent that the humans took an inventory of what the chimeras had already stock piled in the main house, so they didn't send rubber bands or plastic bags, which were already in large supply.

Though glad at the donation, Ankh decreed that they would continue to live in the caves, until other promises were kept. Resolutely, they gathered around the fire, made possible by their new lighter and endured another night in the muddy cave.

The next day, a bustling disturbance from Furtown swept through the valley, to the caves. Roaring construction vehicles, screaming electric saws, tapping hammers and more. The repairs had begun.

The chimeras avoided the day's hub-bub, but after dark they inspected the progress. Each trip increased their conviction that the "cuddlers" had meant what they said. But, Ankh and Cedrick remained skeptical. "This could all be a trap."

That baleful statement failed to curb Jezebel's enthusiasm for their drastically upgraded new home. First, they got the water and power systems running, and replaced the weather-damaged exterior of the main house and another across the street. They demolished the rest of the neighborhood and let the greenery flourish in their place.

In the pair of houses, except for coffee tables, which were the perfect height to dine on, the Makers removed the human furniture and decorations:

the sagging beds, collapsed sofas, toe-pinching rocking chairs, useless paintings.

Along the walls in each bedroom, they added wide shelves, about a foot from the floor, later to be covered in plush beds. Above these, they made cat playgrounds, consisting of small, carpeted platforms at different heights on the walls, with sisal lined ramps connecting them. Viewing perches were installed at all the windows, and the filthy carpets and fractured tiles were replaced with wall-to-wall ceramic.

Lazy Susans were built into the cabinets, whose doors were removed. A rope was tied around the refrigerator door handle, to be pulled open with one's teeth. The living rooms became dining areas, with coffee tables and pads to sit on.

The bathroom fixtures were ripped out and the floor paved with concrete with a central drain, and easy-to turn facets were installed at their height. More fantastically, the linen closets were transformed into a step in dryer, operated by weight sensors in the floor, with air jets installed at several locations.

All the interior doors were removed and the outside ones were upgraded with two-way hinges, and had bolt locks installed a foot from the floor – they locked or unlocked easily. Unaided, Jezebel could push a door open.

Signs of Spring were emerging when the construction wound down with the removal of thorny plants and poison ivy. In sunny areas, edible herbs were planted, and aromatic cedar saplings were sunk into new holes, watered and tamped down.

#

“The Makers gave us a way to lock the house. That’s a big deal,” Georgie insisted one afternoon, while pacing her sturdy black bulk in front of the cave opening.

Sitting around and in the cave, many nodded at her assertion. It was a statement of trust on the part of the humans. The majority of chimeras were ready to enjoy the superb new Furtown, especially Ricky, whose arthritis in the damp cave had worsened over the Winter. His ears, one black and one white flicked back. “We can’t get medical aid, until we move.”

“Yes,” Jezebel blurted. Then, more meekly, “We need it. Flea and tick treatment...” she left unvoiced her mounting desire to be sterilized, to no longer have to go through the maddening urges of being in heat, without a mate her age.

Cleo was grooming – it had become an all day occupation for the smoky Persian cat. Litz too, frequently hacked up fur balls. Despite his efforts, his cream and brown coat was barely presentable. And Pierre’s white coat had become a dingy, matted mess.

“They’ve proven themselves,” Cleo paused, her tongue tip visible between her lips, which some interpreted as a dig at Ankh. “Now, can we leave this cold, dirty hole?”

Above the many-voiced exclamations of support, Cedrick barked, “Here, here!” The most grim and formidable of the bunch rumbled, “The Makers,” it was notable that he didn’t use his derisive term of pee-pole, “...went out of their way for us.” He sat, his powerful chest puffed out, “At this point, a trap is unlikely.”

With ears pricked, all turned to Ankh, whose Silver Tabby coat clashed with the earthen backdrop. “I know waiting’s been hard, but it was the right choice. We’ll never forget the trauma they inflicted on us before.” She thoughtfully closed her eyes and curled her chin downward.

Opening her golden eyes, she rejoined, “But, it seems, they truly want to make amends, and...” she nodded at Cleo and Ricky, “we’ve stayed here long enough.”

They broke into an overjoyed ruckus.

#

Furtown’s renovations were so well designed, that compared to the wrecks they had lived in and their sparse cave dwelling period, it was like a utopia. The plentiful food, tidy, warm shelter and hygiene tools were a delight. For a day, even the serious-minded gave in to revelry.

But, the following day, Ankh called a meeting to discuss how to strategize their upcoming contact with the Makers. Their leader’s shrewdness was impressed on all, even upon Jezebel, who was exhausted from her gleeful romping.

Ankh summarized, “We have to keep our boundaries, as a race.” She glanced at Cedrick, whose brows had for the entire meeting, been gathered into knots. “Yes, we’ll accept their aid, but we can’t allow them to change who we are. Especially after family comes.”

“They’d have us cut the bonds we’ve made here,” Pierre unexpectedly added – he hadn’t yet spoken at a meeting. “This,” his newly clean, fluffy head swiveled to regard the occupants, “this is our true family.”

The elder residents nodded.

But, the newcomers, Jezebel, Penny and Jasper, weren’t outwardly supportive of his sentiment. Jezebel blurted, “We should decide that,” and was instantly bashful.

A variety of disconcerted sounds were released.

“She’s right,” Lizz said from her right, with an affectionate lean against her.

For the first time in her life, Jezebel was validated.

He continued, “If such bonds are enforced by either side, that’s not family – it’s containment.” He flipped a forepaw behind his ear for a scratch, enlivening his brown mane. Then, he went on self-deprecatingly, “I mean, the percentage who want to return is most likely nil. But, it’s the principle.”

Penny eyed the Himalayan with appreciation. “We must have freedom of choice.”

Cedrick sneered, “Ankh isn’t suggesting otherwise. She...,” he tipped his chin up, “...we think that deceit is part of human nature.”

“And,” Melody added, “we’re going to be dependent on them again.”

“Exactly,” Cedrick said. “So, we must stay on guard.”

There was a solemn quiet.

Then, with her irrepressible tail wagging, Georgie added, “But, can’t we enjoy this? So far? And if their help is genuine...”

Ankh broke in, “...that’s possible too. Maybe they’re a bit dependent on us – on this working.” Her dark-ringed, gold eyes narrowed. “Maybe we need to make that so.”

How would we do that? Jezebel silently wondered.

“At least,” Jasper added, “we don’t have to hide anymore.”

The meeting broke up on that positive notion, but for the rest of the day, there was no more romping.

#

Three weeks later, “It’s for your own good,” Bobby told her, while the tip of his ginger, striped tail curled upward and flattened – brushing the platform’s beige carpet, with a metronome’s accuracy. Regarding Jezebel, his saffron eyes tipped toward the center of his forehead.

“But, it’s an untruth,” she protested, “I can’t fool myself.”

She looked away from the attractive male, a month older than her, and willingly brought by his parents to Furtown. He was one of four who arrived since the building was complete. With his less abusive upbringing, how could he council her? But, his idea of interpreting her mother’s visit in a positive light was intriguing.

“Trust me, I know about dysfunction,” he added. “My parents seemed reasonable to you all, but they’re good at masking their mental games.”

“I wish my mother could mask her cruelty.” She glanced out the window, at the chimera dogs wrestling in the back yard. “When she’s drunk, it’s all up front.”

“So, there’s no second guessing,” he declared off-hand.

She narrowed her eyes, “Just open hatred.” She jumped from the wall platform to a dog bed, then to the floor. Striding away, she said over her shoulder, “Nice try.”

She left the room, turned a corner, and sped toward the back porch, almost colliding with Lizz.

“Beg pardon,” he exclaimed, while she rushed past and out into the yard.

Like when she had originally escaped, her emotions rose and twirled around themselves, like a maelstrom. She wanted to both run and to lie down and weep. Worst of all, she longed for Bobby to follow her.

“No distractions,” she scolded herself, again regretting that she had opted to wait on being steri-

lized. Bobby wasn't either, though Furtown's first generation denizens already were.

Jezebel needed privacy to process that morning's interaction with Mom. Though she was sober, she spoke consoling words as if she was dictating. Then, halfway through proclaiming her worry at the loss of her daughter, she give up the artifice for the weary statement, "You don't look as shabby as I thought. With other splicies looking after you."

Mom's implication that she needed to be looked after by those whom she regarded as equals was infuriating. At the time, Jezebel couldn't think of how to counter it. I just took it, like I always do.

She sprinted toward an old oak on the side of the main house and charged up the massive trunk, only slowing at the forth intersection of branches. The saddle-like crook where, in their search for sunlight, two hearty limbs divided the trunk into a 'v', had room for her to recline, with her claws hooked into the bark.

Cloaked with the gold of the setting sun, the peaked roofs and the bountiful greenery of Spring in Furtown was a visual balm. Her fondness for its occupants and environs so clashed with her internal storm, that she cried for several minutes. As her tears spent themselves, clarity rinsed the detritus from her mind.

She tried Bobby's suggestion – visualized how she wished the meeting with her mother had gone: Mom's heartfelt apologies for her cruelty and drinking. Her relief at seeing Jezebel well and growing. Instead of going on about her entering AA treatment to the point of self-aggrandizement, "yes, I'm being accountable with you...", she asked after Jezebel's friends and the activities there. She was glad that her daughter had found this, "...wonderful community. It's so much better than what I could provide. I'll see you next week, my dear Jez."

It was a movie, staring a tender stranger who wore Mom's face and spoke with Mom's voice – words that she would never admit. Because they weren't true.

Self pity at reality's hurtful injustice wracked sobs from Jezebel, until she remembered one of

Bobby's statements: "We have to give ourselves what our families couldn't." There was no denying that the idea, if not the method, was brilliant.

She vowed, "I'm not letting her nastiness scar me," and pictured her mother's power over her shriveling. Its brittle vine snapped, and fell away.

The image was replaced by her actual view. Between the tree's branches and leaves, feathery clouds spread against the cerulean sky, and were dipped in fuchsia and orange near the wooded horizon. She was aware of how small and light she was, how embracing and vast the sky.

"Jezebel!" It was Bobby. In the dappled shadows far under her tree, his small, lithe form melted in and out of the bronze light, as if he was spawned from it. "I was arrogant – sorry! I just wanted to help. Jezebel?"

She took in a deep breath, then answered, "I'm up here."

Through the dense foliage and network of boughs, his eyes met hers, "Wow, you really must be angry!"

She laughed.

"Can I come up?"

"No, I'll come down!" Studying the elaborate tree configurations below her, "But, how?" she murmured. "Oh, I see."

With distended claws, she took a head-first, diagonal path over a mound in the trunk and scrambled to a lower crook. There she paused, examining the structures and found another route, skirting the trunk and landing on a lower branch. Stepping down to an adjacent one, she found another passable segment, leading to a broad limb. In a few minutes, she let gravity compel her spread-eagled, spike-footed body down the remaining tree trunk, and sprang into the turf near Bobby.

With his ears plastered against his head, his eyes were as round as marbles, "You ok?"

"Yeah," she said, exhilarated.

After a few blinks, he sat. "Well, shut my mouth! You can handle anything, Jezebel."

"But, I like company. Sometimes." She walked away with her tail like a flagpole.

#

“After six months of regular interactions with the chimera residents of Furtown, last month’s introduction of teachers, to improve their spotty – pun intended – literacy...”

Lizt and his audience groaned.

“When are they going to stop being cute?”

Cedrick snarled.

Shaking his head, Lizt searched the newspaper page for where he was in the story, then continued reading aloud, “...education in math, geography, history, and so forth. The splicies were correct – advancing their learning staves off boredom. Though they could never contribute to society, they’ve shown remarkable promise in grasping complex problems.” He pauses, with distaste creasing his face.

At his side, Penny grumbled, “So, we’re just oddities with no purpose. They’ll never get it!”

Lizt’s ears cocked in her direction, waiting to see if she had finished. No one replied. The group wasn’t convinced that they should justify their existence – a principal so important to humans that they themselves strive and compete to the point of exhaustion, to prove it.

With no other interruptions, Lizt read out, “But, this pales in comparison to the latest development – Furtown’s first offspring! Though the parents wouldn’t allow us to take pictures of their litter, all four kits are healthy and resemble their parents, except for one...”

From her lookout, atop the porch bannister, “Hide it,” Ankh hissed. She had been scanning the back yard.

In the sudden collapse common to tired dogs, Jasper sprawled his long, chestnut and white body across the local paper.

Soft voices approached. Then, Bobby sprang up the porch steps in a tiger-like bound. Surveying his relaxed friends in the breezy shade, “Hey, all,” he said, then bowed his head to lap from a water bowl.

Through half closed lids, they perceived Jezebel’s grey form ascending the stairs at a measured pace, followed by a tumble of frisking kits – three in number and colored in a smattering of grey and ginger with white chests and ‘socks.’

She sat with her back to the others, watching her young ambush each other on the stairs. As their paws hit the cool concrete porch, they pranced through the open door and into the main house.

Raising his head, Bobby, said, “I’m goin’ a getch’a,” and trotted after them.

But, Jezebel remained where she was. “Come on, Clara,” she called into the yard.

They heard a distant squeal, “flower!”

“You can bring it,” Jezebel replied.

In a few moments, her last kit clambered up the first step. On the final stair, a dandelion bounced – the long-stemmed weed was gripped in her raccoon-like hand. Treading on the closed fist had encumbered Clara. Yet, in other instances she excelled at manipulating things. Even at two months old, she adored arranging the toys which the Makers brought into patterns on the floor, and regularly brushed Pierre, Lizt and Cleo until gleaming.

“For you, Mommy,” she said, rubbing against Jezebel.

“How sweet.” With eyes squeezed shut, Jezebel nuzzled her. “I love your gift.” After a moment, she cheerily said, “Let’s get some snacks.”

As they drew near, Lizt’s China blue eyes lingered on the dandelion as it incrementally bobbed against the floor, with each of Clara’s strides. Then they met Jezebel’s peaceful mien. He smiled, “A lovely gift, much appreciated.”

As Day Follows Night by Karen L. Kobylarz

Though the water clock by the door indicated she had arrived early, Marha raced into the dining hall. Where in the name of the Crystal was Kilha? Marha craned her neck hoping to glimpse her cousin’s sun-colored locks. While she and Kilha were returning to their rooms after the day’s trials, a messenger had handed Kilha a letter. Kilha had rushed from her chamber without changing, the missive clutched in her hand. Why hadn’t she shared the message with Marha?