



Gifted

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Animals

“They called it the Gift.

“For centuries the Gifted women existed, sought after by community after community, generation after generation, society after society, culture after culture.

“They once attempted to keep their identity to themselves, only shared within Gifted communities; but with the setting of the sun, the Gifted transformed, and many soon came to realize the difficulty in defending from the label ‘Gifted’ when the nightly population of a town was entirely composed of a strange assortment of intelligent animals.

“Some Gifted were fortunate enough to take the form of monkeys, apes, pandas, raccoons; the existence of thumbs in their nightly escapades made it easier to continue the work of their daily lives. Others were less fortunate: those who took the form of a marine animal during a drought or a reptile during the winter were less likely to survive.

“Yet these Gifted women, regardless of the species of their transformation, were always immensely beautiful, and with each transformation, had the power to grant a single wish – whatever the asker desired. Throughout history, they were pursued, hunted, and enslaved by those intent on capturing them for their beauty and the bountiful fortunes their Gift bestowed... until they disappeared.

“Society has deemed their existence a legend, likened to that of vampires, werewolves, and other mythical

creatures. However, many researchers involved in the study of folklore contend that they did indeed exist; some even advocate their contemporary existence, hidden away in communities unknown or even living within today's civilization, their nightly forms a secret from those they associate with in their day-to-day lives.

“So... that's the Gifted. Any questions?”

Janine peered out hopefully at her audience; despite her inclusion of humorous animal pictures and rather impressive PowerPoint transitions, the faces of her classmates showed the despair and apathy ripe in end-of-semester college students. She had unfortunately expected this; the Gifted were not well-known outside of folklore research, and with the stress of upcoming exams on her classmates' minds, she figured that they would use this time to rest their brains rather than pay attention. But still, this topic was important to her, and she had hoped that it would resonate with at least a few of her classmates.

As Janine was the last signed up to present today, her professor let the class out a few minutes early. She walked out to her car –late to campus as usual, Janine hadn't exactly found the best parking spot– and headed home. While on a topic she genuinely enjoyed, the presentation had been a constant source of stress in the previous few days; Janine was quite happy to have it over with, and the adrenaline and jitters from public speaking were finally settling into a feeling of relief and rising excitement.

As she pulled up to her house, nearly indistinguishable from the others in the neighborhood, Janine noticed a car in the driveway; ‘mother's home early,’ she thought. ‘Of course.’ After parking, grabbing her backpack, and locking her car (Janine tended to forget this last step; she was rather proud of herself for remembering today, especially following such a stressful day), she headed inside. In the living room, she found her mother curled up in an armchair by the fire, book in hand. In the past, Janine would have poked fun at her for using the fireplace in the middle of May; however, now that Janine knew the truth, this was a common occurrence.

For much of Janine's childhood and adolescent life, her mother had worked night shifts, always leaving before the sun set and after it rose. However, the summer after Janine graduated high school, her parents had decided that she should know the family secret, although she hadn't known that there was one; her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, great-great-grandmother, and so on, each possessed the Gift, and as the sun set on Janine's 20th birthday, the Gift would surface in her. When her mother told her this, Janine had scoffed. “Very funny, mother. I'm not a kid anymore; I haven't believed in the Gifted in years, just like Santa

and the Tooth Fairy.” But as the sun sank below the horizon, her mother had transformed, leaving a very fluffy cat in her chair.

Janine’s reception had been rather unexpected; after gazing at the furry form of her mother, she turned to her mom. “Is this why we never had any pets? I pleaded for a cat for years, yet there’s been one living here at night this whole time!”

Her mom had laughed and turned to the feline. “I told you not to worry.”

Her mother had then gracefully leapt into Janine’s lap, rubbed her head on her hand, and curled up under Janine’s caressing hand, purring happily, while her mom explained in greater detail the history of the Gifted and how it would impact Janine. “You must always keep this a secret, she had said. There are those who still believe in the existence of the Gifted –your existence– and if they discover you, they will attempt to capture you. Until your Gift reveals itself, you will be safe. But until then, and from then on, you must never tell anyone.”

Her parents had been very hesitant when she told them of the topic of her presentation. Despite her intimate knowledge of the Gifted, thanks to her mother’s nightly transformations and the oral history which her parents had passed on to her, they had insisted that she only use information found in research articles online and in the library. Janine understood this; she couldn’t let on that she knew any more than the researchers who had made it their life’s work to study the Gifted. However, this did not stop her from immensely enjoying the topic, and with the presentation taking place on her 20th birthday, she felt it would be fitting material.

Her mother looked up from her book, smiled at Janine and asked, “are you excited for this evening?”

“Excited and... terrified,” she responded.

“That’s how it always is,” her mother said. “Your mom will be home soon, and we’ll be here for you if you need us. Do you still want to go through your first transformation on your own?”

“Yes, mother, I’d prefer that, I think,” Janine replied.

Her mother smiled. “In that case, I would suggest that you eat some of the leftovers in the fridge and spend the next couple of hours mentally preparing yourself; while not painful, the transformation... takes some getting

used to.”

Janine laughed nervously, hugged her mother, grabbed some food, and retreated to her room. While extremely excited, the nervousness was stronger; rather than prepare herself as her mother suggested, Janine turned to Netflix to drown out her thoughts, and in no time, her parents were knocking on her door, letting her know it was almost time.

Janine took a deep breath, her nerves rising immediately. “You can come in,” she said.

They opened the door, and her mom, still in her work clothes, rushed forward to hug her daughter, saying, “you’ll be fine, sweetie. Well, I don’t actually know, as I don’t have the Gift, unlike your mother, but I’ve been around my in-laws enough to know that they are all doing well and that means you’ll do well and I love you so much and don’t forget to close the blinds cause we don’t want the neighbors to see, but you already know that cause you’re such a smart kid, well you’re not a kid anymore, but—”

“Thanks, mom,” Janine said, knowing that her mom rambles when she’s worried. “I love you too.”

Her mom stepped back, with a smile and watery eyes, and her mother, noticeably less frantic, came forward to hug Janine as well. “As your mom said, you’ll be fine. It’s a lot to take in, the transformation. But despite its strangeness, and the challenge of keeping my identity a secret, I would never wish my Gift away.

“But do understand that it is in our power to do so. If you truly dislike your Gift, you may use your nightly wish to become human, for good. I cannot promise that I will not be disappointed, but I will understand if this is your decision, and I am sure that your mom would not object to your human company during the night.”

Janine’s parents smiled at each other, and returned their gaze to Janine. “We love you and support you, no matter your decision. I hope that you enjoy tonight, in all its strangeness and novelty,” her mother said.

“Thank you,” Janine responded, smiling lovingly at her parents. She hugged them each a final time, and they excused themselves, closing the door behind them.

With her mother’s calm demeanor and her mom’s oddly consoling frantic worry, Janine’s nerves faded away, replaced almost entirely by excitement. She was about to experience something that every single woman in her maternal bloodline had experienced. From what she knew of her family’s history, very few had wished away

their Gifts; Janine knew that whatever happened tonight, she would not add to that number.

As her thoughts continued, Janine watched the sun dip lower and lower on the horizon, until she could only see the top portion of the bright orange ball. She leaned forward, pulled the blinds closed, walked to the center of the room, and waited. Somehow, with her eyes closed and a wall in the way, Janine could sense the sun's descent in the sky. With some sort of phantom sight, she watched as the final sliver of sun sank from view, and the instant its light vanished below the horizon, she felt it: the transformation, stranger than she ever could have imagined; she agreed with her mother – this would take a while to get used to.

She opened her eyes and took a step forward, revelling in the feeling of her new form; her mother had said that her bloodline has always taken the form of felines, and Janine was no different. She looked into her floor length mirror and was met with the glowing gaze of a cheetah, spotted and lean. In her excitement and rapt attention, her tail, she noticed, had raised itself high in the air. She turned towards her bed, noting that the movement of her four legs was entirely natural, and leapt, testing her strength; she landed smoothly and silently on the bed, and flopped sideways in content.

'This is what I was always meant to be,' she realized. In her happiness, she felt a deep, rumbling purr start in her upper chest, and Janine knew that she would never be able to give this up; despite now being confined to the house during the night, despite never being able to sleepover with her friends or go out for a night on the town, she knew that this form was more 'Janine' than her human form would ever be.

She leapt down from her bed, padded to the door, opened it with her paw, and raced down the hallway; Janine wanted to share this moment with her family.

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