

Sense of Scale

~1700 words

“A pleasure to meet you,” the guide says in the chemical language. “The exit is this way. But before I lead you to the greatform foundry, I am required to inform you that this is your last opportunity to turn back. You know that the bonding process will leave you unable to function as a smallform. The Council urges you now to remember everything you have here. Your smallform friends, or family; the potential to have offspring; the joys of... of flight.”

Her last remark tastes of embarrassment. Of course I will never fly again. My wings lie useless on my back, crushed in the same accident that took my mate. As for children, we left a clutch of eggs at the hatchery some time ago. I never checked to see if any matured.

“I understand. Thank you.” I say, wafting the chemical message at her. “I wish to continue.”

“Very well.” She turns.

A long tunnel takes us out of the smallform citadel. It opens into light, on a broad plain of varnished wood. The silhouette of a greatform bends to greet us; this must be the sculptor who took up my contract to construct my new body. My guide waves her antennae and flares her wings in greeting, then turns to me.

“I wish you happiness, truly,” is her only message. She turns and scuttles back into the tunnel. I watch the glint of distant light as it reflects off of her carapace.

The sculptor bends down to put her nostrils level with me, out of which she has expressed a crude chemical message: “Welcome. I show you body.” Does the mastery of pheromones truly diminish so much? I learned all that I could about the progression of greatform culture as part of the preparations for transitioning, but I was told that everything about their new variety of language was best understood after I was more accustomed to greatform existence.

The sculptor takes me in her hands and gives me an aerial tour of the thing that is to be my body, passing down words for each part, just as I learned them. “Foot. Leg. Stomach. Shoulder. Head.” It is made entirely of enchanted clay, and roughly featured; the sculptor will put the finishing touches on it in the coming weeks, while I bond with it.

“Mouth,” the sculptor tells me as she puts me inside. I clamber into the slit of the face, clamber across the stones inside, and find the socket on the ceiling. Here I wriggle up and in, to the seat of control.

All is cool and dark in a way I have not felt since the hatchery. The corporal clay seals around me, and I feel the brush of a hundred silver nerves latch and tug at my mind. Sleep, they tell me. I do.

Time rolls over me. I reflect. Once I thought I would never to take a greatform. No matter that all the great creatives and theorists of beetle society were taking greatforms; I was never one of those. They promised whole new ways of finding meaning in the world, but I had found all the meaning I needed. And what would it mean, to renounce the very body you had been born to? Our gods were still insectoid. Passal the Beetle, Lepid the Moth, Theraphos the spider, and all the rest. No deity walked on two legs.

Over the weeks, I can feel my awareness spreading through the vast clay construct. The cranium, where my smallform is buried; the trunk, to which it is attached. Shoulders branch into arms which branch into hands and fingers. All along the careful hands of the sculptors massage the body into existence, smoothing curves of muscle, carefully working the joints to ensure proper range of motion, finally moving to mold the features of the head.

And a sudden tearing sensation. Lights flare across a dark canvas – fresh nerves alight with alarm signals – I feel both the claustrophobia of being buried inside clay, and of being the clay; I writhe to free myself, and it is the clay that moves, not the tiny beetle body inside. More sensation as bits of the body smack against unseen surfaces. New physical instinct directs me to open my eyes. Flat shapes on a plane, real light, and then – finally – depth, as my eyes adjust.

I am in the workshop. The body is sitting up on a long, flat table running down the center of the room. Where is the sculptor? I fiddle with more of the clay muscles, and my head jerks to the side; my eyes take in a sculptor slumped against the wall. Her body seems stunned or injured, but then she looks up and locks her eyes with mine. She points. My eyes follow her finger all on their own.

Down at the end of the room, a door is swinging closed. I put the pieces together. A thief broke in to steal whatever enchanted clay he could get his hands on. He has torn something unfinished off of my new body.

My nerves spark with the impulse to move. I swing my legs over the side of the table and prepare to give chase.

The drop to the floor makes me stumble, but I do not fall. Have I deformed my legs? I can feel that the body has nearly set solid, but clearly some parts remain fresh enough to rip free... however, I cannot for the life of me tell which part is missing. My feet and toes are all there to bear me to the workshop door. My hands and fingers wrench it open.

The door opens to a landing overlooking a cobblestone square. Everything, the door, the buildings, resembles the architecture I recall from the smallform citadel, but different, scaled up to bear more weight and built to accommodate bipeds. A stairwell leads down to street level. A greatform in a cloak hurries down the last few steps, glances back at me, then breaks into a run across the square. I see no one else around to stop him. I hurry down the steps, each one a little steadier, as the body's preprogrammed instincts kick in. By the time I hit the cobbles I can manage a run.

I follow him down a side street. He's fast. And he has total mastery of his body. But I'm completely fresh, and every limb hums with newborn energy, and it's not quite the flight that I have missed so dearly but it is the fastest I have ever moved, and I am catching him up when he turns into a new square – this one inhabited. I hit a pedestrian, hard. I tumble with more flashing of nerves – my body is splayed all over the ground, what has happened? – but the body settles itself faster than I expect, and I jerk myself upright and cast my gaze all around.

Even in this strange, half-familiar world I can recognize a house of worship. The square is lined with temples to each of the deities. There, greatforms in pink clothing, no doubt the

funerary priests of Opis the earthworm, and there, the brown vestments of dutiful Millipedes. I spot the thief slipping into a crowd of greatforms as they enter a temple done up in dark green.

The woman who I bowled over stares up at me. Her mouth moves, but as she sees me her eyes widen and she brushes her nose with a finger, no doubt asking a pheromone question. I am too animated to slow down and speak with her.

I join the crowd as they enter the temple, wondering, briefly, why *this* temple is so popular. Dark green is the color of Tettigon, the Cricket, a minor deity in smallform culture. Has he gained some new significance in the larger world?

As the throng sweeps me in, I see behind me the sculptor, limping into the square, tug on the sleeve of a uniformed man at the entrance and gesture towards the green temple.

Inside I am rocked by the sight of so many greatforms in one place. They pack every space on the rows of benches. And they all move as one. They sway, back and forth, mouths wide open, like a brood of larva tracking a mother. At the front of the room, Cricket priests in flowing robes drag long sticks across wooden contraptions clenched between their chins and their shoulders. And their faces... there is something on them. The greatform's instincts sputter at me that the arrangement of their features has some significance as powerful as a pheromone signature. The priests have their eyes closed and brows wrinkled. And the parishioner's mouths open and curve upwards, their eyes crinkling at the edges.

Except for a few of them, who look at the thief as he sidles along the wall of the room, up towards the front, where I assume some exit awaits him. But the temple is perhaps more crowded than even he hoped for. When he grows impatient and shoves two parishioners out of the way, he draws the attention of the rest of the crowd, more and more of whom look back at me or the open doors behind me. A burly greatform steps up to lay hands on the thief and escort him back out into the street. The priests never stop their curious ritual.

Outside, I gather with the sculptor and the uniformed man. The thief sullenly surrenders his prizes to my hands. Yes – these are the same features I recognize on the greatforms around me. Gingerly, I reach up and feel at the sides of my skull. (Already I think of it as *my* skull.) There are rough pits where the clay was torn off.

The sculptor steps up to face me and moves her face in a way that I will come to recognize as a smile. She gently works the clay into the sides of my form, and as I hear the first meaningful strains emanating from the temple of the Cricket God of Music, I feel my face break into a smile of its own.