



By Celine Gwande

Humans are such an interesting species. They easily get worked up, over the simplest of issues. Odd. And yet for some reason, animals are the pets. Well, were once pets. It has been eons since we've last been referred to as pets. Learning Pals, that's what they call us now. Unoriginal, I know. I've tried voicing my opinion about it. "That's not very interesting", "aren't there any other options" I asked. But the simpletons never seem to understand a word I say, so I've resulted to not speaking at all.

"Merlin", my head cocks into the direction of the familiar voice. It's Eve. She sounds rather joyful today. The average ear might not be able to notice the slightly higher octave she has. To the regular person she's stoic, robotic even. But I can see right through her. She's like this when she has "good news", or at least her version of good news. "Today's a very special day. We have two new members joining The Dome." "How delightful", I sarcastically think to myself. I guess she can see the annoyance on my face, because she follows up with, "Trust me, you'll love them. Especially Maximus, our new Learning Pal." Contrary to her statement, I'm anything but excited. A new Learning Pal means one of *us* has to leave.

It's been three hours since the "good news". I haven't been myself today, and I think the students started to notice. Call me paranoid if you will, but I think they know about our so-called new edition to the Learning Pals. "Ms. Eve, when does Maximus get here?", says a voice from one of the two and a half dozen computer screens in here. It's the kid with thick framed glasses that don't seem to suit his face. My heart and liver switch places. Of course, I'm the one being replaced. I should've connected the dots earlier! "Relax, Nate. I know you're all excited, but she'll be here soon!", she replies with a cheery voice. I guess this is where it all finally ends for me.

Classes are over and Eve puts me in a tiny cage. Is this what I've been reduced to? The world out there is not safe for an animal like me. I've seen what it's done to unsuspecting animals, I cannot be next. I could try and protest, but that wouldn't work. She won't understand a word I say. Before I could finish my pity party, we've made it to the entrance of The Dome. With a click of a button, the thick, blue paint coated aluminum doors open. That's when it hit me. The humans have completely destroyed our world. Mesmerised by how corrupt and damaged the atmosphere is, I barely notice the muscular man walking through all that smoke. Through

my peripheral vision, I see him holding a similar cage to mine. “That must be my replacement” I think to myself.

Unbeknownst to me, she closes the large doors and looks at me with the ghost of a grin. “Thought I was letting you out?”, she asks, telepathically confirming my thoughts. “You must be Evelyn”, says the hunk, in a voice so low, I thought he was whispering to himself. “It’s Eve”, she responds, a tad bit annoyed. “And this must be Maximus”, she continues. He lifts his duplicate of my cage and pulls off the thin cloth over it. Behind the jail like bars is a bird. I can’t tell what species it is, but I do know for sure it’s extremely underfed. Poor guy. “And what’s your hawk’s name?”, asked Hulk. He cannot be serious, can he? A hawk? How dense could someone be to mistake an owl for a hawk?! It’s like me mistaking a human for a chimp. How absurd.

“This is Merlin, she’s actually an owl”, she answers in a matter-of-factly tone. He crouches, look at me and waves. Now I see him, like *really* see him. My eyes meet his. They’re a stained type of blue. If you look close and hard enough, you could see a hint of the original colour. You can tell they’ve been tinted by the thick air pollution out there, turning them into a dusty blue shade. My eyes travel lower. He’s got the build of a Mr Universe contestant. I would know. Eve made me watch an entire month’s season in a weekend. And he’s quite tall too, I might add. Probably an estimate of around 188 centimeters. Finally, my eyes land on the cage in his hand. The premature creature in it is staring back at me. Very intensely. The ten second staring contest is broken when the humans start talking.

“How’s it like, out there?”, Eve asks in an unfamiliar tone. She sounds genuine, concerned... human. The man clears his throat, “everything’s ruined.” He answers in a husky tone. His reply fills me with rage. Because he forgot to mention it’s ruined because of them. Humans. They chopped down our homes to build they’re fancy metal trees, and we just have to adapt to it. Why are *they* superior? Because of them, I’ve corrupted my eyes with the image of suffering animals. Left out there to die in the world *they* destroyed, all in the name of inedible wealth. “Why are you so quiet?”, the alien bird asked, bringing me back to the present. “Because I don’t want to waste the limited oxygen we have on pointless conversation.” Is what I should’ve said, but instead I ruffle my feathers and look away.

After an excruciatingly long ten minutes, we make it to The Nest. I don't know why it's called that, this is not what a nest looks like. This looks more like a scientific incubator than a nest. Eve takes me out my cage and holds me in her arms. I love being this close to her. The man repeats her action, but instead, places the frail bird into a cheap imitation of a nest. He presses one of the buttons and the lid closes, with oxygen being released into the nest. Looking at this gives me PTSD, I remember when that was me. So vulnerable. Begging the oppressor to give me back the life they stole.

"David", the man finally says. "My name is David. I apologise for the inconvenience Max and I caused. We didn't have anywhere else to go." Pink flashes over Eve's face. She's embarrassed. "It's no problem, really. It's unstable out there, for anyone." I sympathise with her. Just like us, she has to suffer the consequences of her forefathers. We have to puzzle back the broken world they left us. There's a thick cloud polluted of tension in the room, followed by a drizzle of awkward silence. Thankfully, it's broken when the animal doctor walks in. I don't remember the formal name for it. Veteran! I think that's what they're called.

I don't understand medical talk. I'm more of a literature kind of bird. But I think they're saying the tiny bird is going to be okay. I can tell this based off how David's face brightens up before the doctor finishes talking. Right before he finishes his sentence, David leans in and gives the poor man the tightest hug known to birdkind. Eve's face lights up at the sight of this. I've got to admit; this sort touched my heart too. Sort of. The doctor and David walk out, Eve places me on one of the fake branches and follows suite. "What's your name?", the sickly bird asks. For such an unwell animal, it sure is curious. "are you always this quiet?", it asks, for the second time. Before I even have time to process the questions it fires another one. "Where's David? Oh! I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Max. David's friend. Where's David?", she continues with her monologue.

"You talk too much", I say, shocked by the sound of my voice. It's been a while since I last spoke. "Oh, so you do talk?", Max replies, with a strained voice, before bursting out into unhinged coughs. "I think you've exhausted your word limit.", I respond with a smirk. Before Max can think of a smart comeback, the humans walk back in. "Did you here that Max! You're gonna be fine!", David says, striding towards the incubator, and lifting Max on his index finger. "They can't understand you.", Eve says. "Yes, we can!", both Max and I say

unanimously, except I said that in my mind. “Yes, they can.”, David says, advocating on our behalf.

It’s the next day, Maximus and David join us in class today, and David seems more excited than either of us. I’m probably the least excited of the bunch. Sharing a job was one thing, but a room?! That’s a whole other story. You heard me. *A room!* Max and I were pared up. I’ve always seen myself as more superior, since the other Learning Pals are all coupled up, so being given a roommate is very humiliating. Especially if said roommate won’t stop yapping all the time. “How does this whole learning thing work?”, David asks eagerly. “Well,”, Eve responds, “because of the current situation our world is in right now, we had to find another way to still give children a good education, even if the world is falling apart. They deserve the right to learn, and know how it was before, you know... all this”.

“I get that part, but I mean these guys.”, he says, pointing at Max and I. “Oh. Right”, she says flashing an embarrassed smile. “The past 50 years have been rough for everyone, and everything. Most of the animals tried adapting, but failed. Which caused many to go extinct. So, The Dome is where we incorporate the last of our animals left into our teaching methods. We get to show the kids what real life animals looked like.”, she wraps up. “Have you seen any other animals before they went extinct?”, David asks curiously. “Yes, I have actually.”, she replies joyfully. “I had a pup once, before he passed.” You can see how his eyes lightens up. Has David never seen any other animals?

That’s when it hit me. That he’s probably just like the rest of the kids here. Poor guy probably doesn’t know what a cat feels like. It’s sad to think this is the world now. Where we rely on pictures of animals, as proof that they once roamed the surface of this forsaken world. I remember when the kids would ogle at me, as though I was some prehistoric animal, risen from the dead. We make it to class, and David’s face is struck with confusion. “Where are the learners?”, he asks so genuinely. The computer monitors unanimously turn on and joyful children’s faces light up the screen. He takes a step back and audibly gasps. He looks like a curious cat, if only he knew what that looks like.

Eve lets out a loud belly laugh, she’s amazed by his utter confusion. “It’s all online.”, she says, mid laugh. “We can’t have kids coming into class with our bio hazard of a planet. It’s safer this way.” I look over at Max and she’s in awe too. Her eyes bouncing around from one

screen to the next. I subconsciously think to myself, “maybe this whole Max and David thing isn’t so bad after all.”, but my pride shoves that thought back. This is going to be fun!