

FREEZE FRAME



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A Secret of N.I.M.H. Fanfic

FREEZE FRAME: A Secret of N.I.M.H. Fanfic

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FREEZE FRAME

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Written and Illustrated by
Daphne Lage



FREEZE FRAME



CHAPTER ONE

The Assignment

I want to be Annie Leibovitz.

That's my goal. To be surrounded by the rich and famous, taking still images forever immortalized on the cover of Rolling Stone. How I want that life. I want to be on every socialite's party list, hob-nobbing with celebrities begging to be the subject of my next photo shoot. I want the grand studio in the middle of Manhattan filled with pretty-boy assistants jumping at my every request.

Imagine being the boss over the highest paid actors and actresses in the world, making them do whatever I want for the sake of the session. I want to be the toast of the photography world. I want to be the toast of the art world. Heck, just to be the toast of the town in general! What could be more perfect than that?

Anything's more perfect than this, I thought as I looked up at the blue sky mottled with ominous dark clouds. *Yeah, that's what I need. To get caught in a downpour before I get my stupid tent up.* I clutched the collar of my coat, shivering against a non-existent wind. I tapped my pockets feeling for my map and compass, unconcerned about getting lost. If anything, I was good at keeping track of directions.

FREEZE FRAME

The heavy backpack filled with camping gear weighed me down mentally as well as physically, the annoying regular creaking straining my already tense mood. I placed a hand on the second, smaller pack strapped to its bottom. The last thing I needed was my camera to get damaged. It was the only reason I was here in this isolated place, away from prying eyes and the nearest convenience store. The area, so pristine and isolated, the only way I was allowed in was by hiking. No vehicles of any kind were allowed near the area much less in it, not even a helicopter.

I bet if I was Marty Stouffer I could have gotten a helicopter, I thought with a sarcastic snort. But I'm not Marty Stouffer. And I'm sure not Annie Leibovitz either.

Annie would not have been caught dead taking this chintzy assignment, '*Native Plants and Wildlife of the Thorn Mountain Wilderness Area*'. I was on my way up. Feh.

National Park Magazine gave me the assignment, not that I was ungrateful. I was going through a professional dry spell before they called. When all a company has to do is grab a book of stock photos to illustrate articles, I found my talent and skill less than appreciated. At least computer jockeys never need to do on location shoots.

The magazine's objective was to remind people who never even went to their local park that national parks are worth preserving. Aren't the flowers pretty? Aren't those baby animals cute? Send a check. I could only

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

thank goodness the editor gives his readers more credit that I was willing to. He could have used any generic landscape pictures and labeled it as 'Thorn Valley' and people would have believed it.

I had been granted a special access permit and had four days to take my pictures and return to headquarters or rangers were going to find and remove me. They are serious about keeping this place protected. I'm sure they especially don't want a creatively drained photographer to trash the place in frustration.

Why couldn't I've been an attorney like my older sister Abby? She was working for the Assistant DA back in New York and accomplishing more than I was at this moment. As good as the money was, this assignment couldn't be over fast enough.

Dog barking up ahead snapped me out of my disillusionment, reminding me that this wasn't the perfect place to wallow in self-pity.

"Eddie!" I yelled up ahead. "C'mere boy!" The dog barked again, bounding through the crunching leaves. "Come on! I don't need you getting lost." At that a black and white Border collie jumped out of the brush. I was glad they allowed me to bring Eddie or else I might go stir crazy. In retrospect it might not have been such a good idea since I'm sure he'll make shooting wildlife a bit difficult. Hopefully I'll be able to control him enough.

FREEZE FRAME

Looking up again, I realized I didn't have much time to settle in before dusk. The dark clouds floated overhead, making me say a silent prayer against their gathering. Before this trip, I watched more Weather Channel than any human being should be allowed, making sure the week I had to do this was free of bad weather in general. But even the Weather Channel was known to be wrong once in a while and the gray clouds above reinforced that fear.

I was getting tired of walking which surprised me. Combined with the stress of having to work on top of spending four days "roughing it", hiking wasn't as fun as I was used to it being. Finding a clear spot in between some trees, I started to make camp.

I was thankful that it didn't take me long to set up the small tent. Getting my gear inside I snacked on a health bar to tide me over. For what seemed to be an eternity, I sat in the center of the tent, half-napping as I sat up. I could hear Eddie's disgruntled yapping at failed attempts to catch whatever small animal crossed his path. That didn't stop the Border collie from trying though.

I set up a small folding chair made of waterproof fabric stretched on an aluminum frame. It doubled as a table for my camera so it wouldn't be on the ground where I could step or roll over on it in my sleep. I dumped out the endless rolls of film.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

If I were lucky, half of the exposures would yield useable images. Half of those images the magazine would take. And only a fraction of those would ever see print. If I was really lucky, I could sell some of the rejected photos to other magazines. The thought started a fantasy about National Geographic publishing a multi-page spread with my photos. My camera wasn't even loaded.

I was beginning to notice how sweaty I was getting. Despite the warm spring weather, I was told nighttime in the woods was surprisingly cold. I opted to overcompensate rather than die of hypothermia.

Pulling off the red and black sports coat, it fell behind me in a noisy polyester pile. An unbuttoned flannel shirt followed it, dumped with equal disregard. Finally comfortable in jeans, a white tank-top, and the tan hiking boots I had purchased just for this occasion, I sat cross-legged for a while longer, savoring the cool air.

There was a rustling on the front of the tent. The sound startled me until a big, black and white fuzzy head poked through the front door slit. Eddie panted, his wagging tail waving his entire body. I smiled relieved it was him instead of the bear I thought it was for a split second.

Cuddling his head I looked into his brown and blue mismatched eyes. Eddie licked my face, trying to force himself into the tent all the way. In his hyper state that was a big no-no. I didn't want the playful dog

FREEZE FRAME

to collapse my only refuge in the vast preserve. He would have to wait until his energy fell to a level I could keep up with.

Feeling rested, my pent up resentment gone, I decided to peruse outside. I'd better get used to it or the shoot was going to take longer than it needed to be. Much to Eddie's delight, I crawled out from the tent, stretching my 5'5" frame. I breathed deeply the clean air, all sorts of noises surrounding us from singing birds to the wind rustling the leaves above.

I was used to the quiet that came with not living in the middle of a large city, although I did prefer the hustle and bustle. I imagined how my sister would have liked it. She probably couldn't survive a half-hour without her tailored suits, leather briefcases and that cell phone glued to her hip.

My mind rambled. That big-shot DA she worked for, what was his name? Jack? I remembered meeting him once when I visited her at the office. Not long enough to really get to know him, though. I found myself smiling. He was cute for an older gentleman with thick eyebrows matching a gray mop of hair that looked like it almost got combed. What topped it was his boyish, if not mischievous charm that attracted me to him immediately.

Too bad he was much older than I could safely date. Yeah, too old. I shook my head, letting out an embarrassed laugh. I couldn't believe I was thinking this. The man could be my father. A really cute father. Another

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

laugh escaped. I decided it was time to get some work done before my thoughts really got out of control.

I went back into the tent. I loaded up the manual camera, placing a couple more film rolls into a pouch strapped to my belt. It was warm enough so I left my coat and flannel shirt behind. They would only be cumbersome. Getting my bearings, I mentally marked the campsite, snapping the compass to my belt. I called Eddie who bounded joyously by my side. With camera in hand we made our way towards the clearing up ahead. I was ready to make history, even if it was in my own mind.

Photography is meditation to me. The minute the shutter starts snapping the rest of the world ceases to exist. All that is real is what is portrayed in the lens, subsequently captured forever on film. Wildflowers were the topic of the day since Eddie insisted on driving everything that could run or fly away. If it wasn't with his incessant barking, it was his uncanny ability to find anything to harass. It wasn't too terrible, though. Thanks to him I was able to capture great action sequences of pheasants in flight and rabbits jumping in terror.

I never realized how many different flowers existed until I had to photograph every single one. My jeans were already getting covered in soil, making me glad I brought an extra pair. I underestimated how dirty everything would get in such a short amount of time. Even my tank top wasn't going to hold out for four days.

FREEZE FRAME

Fortunately the best thing about being secluded is the ability to get butt-naked to wash clothes in the nearest river. Now it was just figuring out how bad I was going to let my clothes get before resorting to that. Rivers may be convenient but not temperature controlled. I shivered at the thought.

Shadows were getting deeper, causing a lot of distraction. I had ended up away from camp longer than I planned. As the sun began to set, I studied my domain. Thorn Valley was about five miles long, running nearly straight north to south. A lake nurtured the valley with a wide rushing stream feeding into it. At least I knew where the local Laundromat was.

Beyond the Valley rose a range of gray, mist shrouded mountains. The highest being the imposing Thorn Mountain, with its distinct triangle shapes. For that first moment, I was in complete awe of my surroundings. A gentle breeze swept dark red strands of my hair into my face.

As I looked at the valley again, the long casting shadows enshrouding the landscape, I ended up with an odd feeling I couldn't pinpoint. It wasn't a bad feeling, just something was out of place. I took a few more photos of the area. Maybe when they were developed something would show up, or not as the case could be. Either way, I lingered as long as I could, searching my brains for answers until the sun hit the horizon. Eddie came up to me quiet and tired. So was I.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

We made haste back to camp, racing the fading light. I may have a compass tempered with a good sense of direction but I didn't have my flashlight.

We made it back without incident, beginning to feel the chill in the air. I unrolled my sleeping bag, positioning myself so Eddie would sleep nearest the opening.

As darkness enveloped the valley, I was glad I had brought the dog with me. To hear how noisy the forest was at night was quite unnerving. Thoughts of being attacked by wild animals as I slept flashed through my mind.

If it weren't for my flashlight, I wouldn't be able to see anything in front of me. The lack of light did have one benefit. The sky was alive with twinkling stars, more stars than I've ever seen. I couldn't help but stare, overwhelmed by its sheer beauty.

Pressing the glow function on my watch, I was surprised at how early it was compared to how tired I felt. Back in the city, it was quite common for me to stay up working until 4 or 5 in the morning. Here it was barely 8:30 in the evening and I was falling apart at the sight of stars in the sky.

Creeping back into the tent with Eddie in tow, I slipped out of my clothes and put on a toasty-warm pair of long johns. It was blissful lying down, snuggling into the sleeping bag. I kept my eyes open, trying to see

FREEZE FRAME

in the pitch darkness to no avail. Eddie curled up, letting out a deep sigh. My eyelids grew heavy as I lay there listening. I never went camping before so this was a first experience. So far so good.

Sure enough, the dog started snoring.

I let out a sigh of my own. Why is it that the snorers always get to sleep first? I tried to concentrate on the miscellaneous rustling, chirping, hooting, whatever other noises I could. That probably wasn't such a good idea as I started thinking about bears. The rangers assured me there were no bears in the valley as they preferred to live closer to the mountains. Just the same though. I should still take the same bear-proofing precautions just in case.

I could see it now. No bears in Thorn Valley until I happen to be there. I started thinking about worst case scenarios. It didn't last long. Thinking became difficult, then before I realized sleep had given me better things to do. Thankfully it was deep enough that I didn't hear Eddie's snoring all night. A bear could have attacked and I wouldn't have noticed. Nothing like hating your job to really tire you out.

Maybe tomorrow I'll feel differently.



CHAPTER TWO

The Curious Catch

The Border collie didn't wait to shake the night's sleep off of him. The whole tent vibrated, waking me in fear that it would collapse.

"What the heck are you doing?" I screeched, pushing the dog out. Eddie sat down, looking back over his shoulder. He panted a happy grin, his tongue flopping to one side.

I squinted, waiting for the haze to lift from my head. I could tell from the partial opening that dawn was just breaking. The air was colder than last night, causing an involuntarily shiver to wave through me. I folded my legs up to my chest, hugging my knees, rocking back and forth to get warm.

Feeling good and ready, Eddie stood, slapping my face with his dusty tail. He exited the tent, leaving me alone to wake up.

I picked up the knocked over black canisters of film, placing them back on the aluminum frame seat. I didn't feel any better than the day before. In fact I felt a little worse for wear.

I slept like a rock but my sleeping arrangement felt one too. It didn't help either that Eddie hogged up most of the precious space. I ended up crunched in a corner. Every painful move reminded me there is only so much cushioning a sleeping bag can give to woodland ground. I wondered

if I would be able to make it through the day much less the remainder of the trip.

Still in long johns, I crept out of the tent, stretching with very stiff joint popping in protest. Wiping the crud from my eyes, the horrible taste in my mouth reminded me of the river in the valley. Like an idiot, I didn't check for the nearest source of running water before setting camp. Now I would have to move. I wasn't going to use my drinking water to brush my teeth.

I looked back at the tent and all my scattered supplies. A heavy sigh lowered my shoulders.

After a breakfast of granola bars, I decided to take some more photos before I tackled packing up camp. I put on the same clothes as the day before adding my flannel shirt. Until the sun warmed the valley, the morning was going to be chillier than I would have preferred.

As I hiked, Eddie trotted alongside me, not his usual bundle of uncontrolled energy. I figured he wore himself out with the novelty of being in the middle of the woods yesterday. I was actually able to take pictures of some of the regular wildlife, tiny chickadees, hyper chipmunks, paranoid squirrels, and even a fox with what looked to be a vole in his mouth. The forest was alive with morning rituals.

FREEZE FRAME

I was glad I took the walk before moving camp. I didn't want to waste time not working. I was hoping I could get my photos before the deadline, allowing me to leave early. Yes, that would be good.

Something caught Eddie's attention causing the dog to jump ahead of me. I continued to concentrate on snapping pictures until he let out a soft whine. Now he had my attention. The Border collie was fussing with an area under a bush, digging away. As leaves and branches flew all over the place, I came over, kneeling down. I attempted to see beyond the dog without getting too close.

"What are you doing, Eddie?" I asked the dog who ignored me. "I don't need you messing up something you're not supposed to." I inched closer noticing the widening hole. "Oh great. You better not be digging some animal up!"

The dog disregarded me as I looked around for a stick to poke him with. I never knew Eddie to go hunting as opposed to just chasing after animals but I didn't want him to start now. And I didn't want to be there when he decided to kill whatever it was he was after. With my luck, it would be some kind of endangered species there was only two of.

Eddie stopped his digging. He furiously sniffed into the hole, snorting a couple of times then whining again. Now I was curious instead of angry. This didn't look like a dog that was hunting. The dog scraped his paws against the earth until his muzzle could fit through the hole.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Intrigued, I started taking pictures. If I was just going to stand there and watch, I might as well work.

Eddie sat down, giving up. Staring at the opening he whined, wagging his tail with apprehensive sweeps. I grew tired of waiting for what seemed to be a never-happening climax. I called Eddie to head back to camp. He wouldn't move.

"I'm leaving without you," I threatened as I turned away from him, hoping he would follow. He didn't even turn his head. "Okay, I'm leaving!" I loudly called, taking a few stomping paces away from him. I walked a couple of more steps, finding myself growing impatient. "Eddie come!" I commanded in my meanest voice while I slapped my thigh.

A moment, then I heard rustling behind me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Eddie trot up with a very satisfied look on his face. Smugly, I went to look away when I did a double take.

Eddie had something in his mouth.

His excited mismatched eyes looked up at me, his toothy grin blocked by what looked to be a bundle of rags. Eddie lifted his head as if he wanted to show me what he had. I reached out to take it until it squirmed.

"Holy!" I yelped, almost dropping my camera. Eddie wagged his tail, pushing his face and whatever it was in his mouth closer. Putting the camera's strap around my neck I reached over with both hands, hoping I

FREEZE FRAME

could coax the dog to give me whatever animal he had without him accidentally biting down.

The brown fur moved again, turning its face towards me. My hands stopped instinctively the minute I realized what it was.

Eddie had a rat in his mouth.

I gathered every bit of strength trying not to freak out. Eddie dug a rat from underneath the bush and was carrying it around like a parcel. I didn't know what to do next. What if the thing was sick, or worse, rabid? I would have to rush Eddie back to ranger headquarters and run to the nearest vet.

Oh no, I might have to get those shots in the stomach too. I started to get queasy. Rats aren't a favorite animal in any household. Sure there are people who keep them as pets but those rats are different from wild ones.

All I knew about wild rats was what I knew from New York. They live in the subways, grow as big as cats and were known to attack people and kill babies if left unchecked. Never mind they were dirty too. Don't tell me about how clean rats are. How clean can an animal that lives in sewer get? And here was Eddie with a damn rat in his mouth!

I just stared at the confused dog. He started whining, moving forward. I inched back not wanting to touch anything then it hit me. The rat was still alive.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Eddie stood there drooling, almost pleading with me to take the thing. My next move surprised even me. If Eddie wanted me to have it so much, then I should take it. The animal looked hurt, it's back leg crusted with blood. No animal should suffer, even if it is a rat.

Looking away, I cupped my hands underneath the dog's mouth. He promptly opened his jaw letting the body fall.

The rat was large for my hands, its head and back legs dangling over. I cradled it in the crook of my arm as I struggled off my flannel shirt.

As I wrapped her up, I got the impression that the dirty green cloth she wore looked like an oversized shirt. My brows furrowed as I shook my head. Maybe this wasn't a wild rat at all instead someone's pet that escaped. Who else would put a shirt on a rat? The rat squirmed, opening her eyes slightly. I was expecting her to panic but she didn't.

"Don't worry," I said, trying to calm the rat down when I was the one who needed calming. "You're safe now. I'm going to take you back to camp." I blocked it in my mind that I was carrying a rat, concentrating on the fact that it was a wounded woodland animal that needed my help.

Eddie kept his eyes on the bundle I held while we walked back. I still couldn't believe what I was doing. Just as we were nearing camp, Eddie spun back in the direction we came from. He started barking, making me jump. I worried when he wagged his tail, whining again.

FREEZE FRAME

"Oh no you don't," I interrupted. "What do I look like, a wildlife rehabilitator? One rat is enough!" To my relief, Eddie decided to scamper ahead to camp. I glanced down at my new companion, sleeping away. I grimaced. Why did it have to be a rat? No one is going to believe I nursed a rat back to health. Well, at least I was going to try to do just that.

Defeating the purpose of the small chair, I placed all my camera equipment on the ground, putting the flannel shirt in its place. Searching the tent, I came across a blue plastic box with a red cross sticker on the cover. I grabbed the first aid kit, placing it next to me. Opening it. I took out a cotton swab, peroxide, and tweezers. Placing them into the open lid, I went to tend to my patient.

I took care in unwrapping the flannel, revealing the large brown and tan rat in the green, oversize shirt. She opened her liquid amber eyes, showing no fear. Maybe she knew I was helping her. I looked at the leg knowing it had to be cleaned. With one hand, I fumbled with the peroxide bottle, dabbing the swab in the solution until it was soaking.

"Uh, this might hurt a bit," I warned, as I was about to touch the swab to the leg. She flinched just once as I lightly stroked the fur, cleaning off the crusted blood, allowing me to see the wound properly. Satisfied that the cut didn't seem too bad I cleaned it once more, grabbing some gauze for a final bandage.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

When I was done, the rat lay in a pile of flannel, her left leg wrapped in a thick bundle. I thought I overdid it with the wrapping but I didn't want it to get infected. I smirked at the irony of the scene. Here was a rat, the very symbol of disease and I was worried about it getting sick.

The rat, weak from her ordeal, shifted her weight in an attempt to get comfortable then closed her eyes. I sat there watching the sleeping rat, growing tired myself.

It was just hitting the afternoon and my stomach was rumbling with hunger. I opened the flap only to be startled by Eddie. He was standing right by the door almost as if waiting for me to come out with a diagnosis.

"She's fine, I think." I was afraid to pass the animal without giving an answer. Eddie wagged his tail, contented. My brow furrowed again as I stared at the dog. What's going on here? Shaking my head, I went to make myself a little lunch. It was obvious my hunger was making me delirious.

After a modest sandwich, fruit, and bottled water, I started to make headway in repacking all of my gear, leaving the tent for last. As always, items that I was able to fit in one container would no longer do so. I ended up spending a lot of time arranging and rearranging.

When it was time for the tent to be taken down, I took a look at my new roommate. The rat was still sleeping but more soundly, obvious she

FREEZE FRAME

had tried moving the bandaged leg. I was glad she didn't chew the gauze off. I was afraid that would be the first thing she would have attempted.

I wondered how I was going to do this. I couldn't carry the rat and take down the tent at the same time. I had to move her, but where? I remembered the two packs outside. If I put the flannel shirt on the backpack until I got the tent folded, she would be okay. I trusted Eddie to not bother her.

I slid my hands under the shirt causing the rat to stir. She did not struggle as I cradled her in my arms, maneuvering out of the tent. I kicked at the rectangular camping backpack until it was flat on its back. Just as careful as the first time I placed down the bundle.

Tucking the shirt around her some more I stepped back to start pulling the tent apart. As soon as my back turned, Eddie walked over, nuzzling the rat with his clammy nose. I couldn't help but be amazed. The rat didn't look bothered at all by the shuffling dog, staying wrapped in the shirt as I hoped she would.

Finishing my chore, I placed the rat on the ground, putting on the heavy backpack. Once ready, I settled her in the crook of my arm, making the hike slow and easy. I knew I was wasting precious time, losing a lot of film opportunities, however it didn't bother me as much as it should have. Rat or not, I felt responsible for the little girl's life and I was going to see it through.



CHAPTER THREE

Welcome to the Valley

I could swear it took me twice as long to set up camp than it originally did before. I looked over the wide grassy field, shielding my eyes from the afternoon sun. There was nothing much in terms of actual shade though at least this time we were near water. The air in the valley had a pleasant tree scent with just a hint of residual wood smoke.

Eddie was already knee-deep in the small stream. I laughed at the way he pounced at the fish swimming below him, splashing water all over. The surrounding valley was very beautiful, perfect for photos. Yet again, something was odd, the nagging feeling stronger.

I sat gazing at the area past the lake, taking pictures as I coasted the time. I used the zoom lens as binoculars, spying on odd shaped plant-life in the not so far distance. A wide, clear area, bright green with close-cropped grass, sloped gently down to the water.

It began to hit me. The reason some of the valley looked strange was because there was something "perfect" about it, a manicured, kept up look. It was the center of this area that caught most of my focus. A large hollow oval of bare earth, like a thick capital O, had been carved out of the grass with a rectangle of lawn in the center.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"What the," I mumbled, looking through the lens again. An area of nearly flat land was cleared, the exposed soil forming ridges in the landscape. As I zoomed in, I recognized plants that I knew did not belong in this valley. Corn, rice, and other vegetables formed what looked to be a modest garden.

The dog was still playing in the water. Eddie was too distracted to notice me walking away, which was what I wanted. I needed to explore this phenomenon up ahead without having a wet, silly dog trample everything.

Taking pictures as I went, I was shocked as to how tidy this mini-farm was with life-size crops. Straight tiny paths with even tinier stone barriers separated the perimeter.

Seeing the O shape in the grass, I studied it closer. The rectangle of lawn was marked with white lines and circles. At either end a pair of white wooden posts supported a dangling net. A miniature soccer set? I then realized the well-worn ring around the field was a running track.

I couldn't take pictures fast enough. Was this some kind of a joke? Who would come to the middle of a secluded valley to make miniature sets? The detail was amazing. The track really did look like it was being used. I continued around taking extreme care to not disturb anything. I didn't want some crazy old-man-of-the-mountain getting on my case because I accidentally knocked over one of his projects.

FREEZE FRAME

A glittering caught my eye. I looked over at what seemed to be holes in a rock bed. As I took more pictures, the shutter suddenly refused to budge. My roll was finished and I didn't bring extra film on the impromptu expedition. I headed back excited at my find. Who would go to all this trouble in the middle of a nature preserve, especially without the super-protective rangers finding out?

As I rolled the film back into its hard plastic shell, the camera slipped, bouncing onto the grass. Much to my horror, the back popped open, the almost rolled film jumping out. I lunged for the roll as it made its way to the stream, luckily grabbing it in time. Unexposed film was still peeking from the canister, ruined. I only hoped it wasn't some of the good images I was able to capture.

"Rats," I cursed.

I returned to the tent, Eddie lying in the grass next to the opening. "Yes, you lie in the sun and stay there," I mumbled to the wet dog.

The bundle of flannel was moving. The rat was sitting up, taking care not to put too much weight on the bandaged leg. She had been grooming, as she looked a lot less frazzled than when I first found her.

I snapped a piece off of my granola bar, holding it out, wondering if she would take it. At first she hesitated. I bit into the bar myself encouraging her to take the piece. I was amused at how dainty she ate the sweet granola.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"I wonder if you belong to someone," I asked the rat. "It's not everyday I see animals dressed up in the wild. Then again, I've been seeing a lot of strange things in this valley."

The rat paused, looking at me with her brown beady eyes.

"Would you believe someone built a garden by the rocks?" I said, cleaning off the camera, making sure nothing was broken. "And a soccer field. Of all things a soccer field!"

The rat stopped eating all together, staring to the point of unnerving me.

"I didn't touch anything," I added with guilt in my voice. "Just took pictures. That's my job. For a magazine. I'm a photographer. National Parks Magazine? You wouldn't have heard of it?"

I stopped myself. I was talking to a rat. Not only that, I was expecting an answer. Well, how couldn't I? Those little eyes looking at me shone with an intense awareness. Would I even dare say intelligent? And the fabric she was wearing. Not once did she try to remove it. In fact, she had smoothed it out. I can't even put a bandanna around Eddie's neck without him freaking out and here was a rat wearing a shirt.

Feeling extremely self-conscious, I turned my gaze away as a headache came on. This whole trip was a mistake. The whole assignment was a mistake. Ever since I got into the valley it had been one weird thing

FREEZE FRAME

after another. I wondered at what point I was going to see a white rabbit with a pocket watch run by me. Or worse, Rod Serling.

My chest tightened with anxiety.

What is going on here? Why am I feeling like a dozen eyes are on me? My head ached convincing me a nice nap was in order. Yeah, that's it. Maybe I'm just stressing myself out. Here I am in the middle of nowhere working on a job that's a thrown bone. I'm spending more time thinking about it rather than just working getting it over with.

Grabbing the first aid kit again, I popped some aspirin. I didn't want to risk falling dead asleep, ending up wasting another day. By lying on the sleeping bag instead of in it, I would force myself to wake up in about an hour. Placing my forearm over my eyes, I drifted off to the sound of the running stream.



CHAPTER FOUR

Rude Awakening

My brain was waking up but my body was still lagging. I could hear Eddie's panting behind me. Maybe he needed sleep just as much as I did. As I tried to soak up as much shut-eye as I could get before having to get up, I heard the faint sound of voices.

"Did she hurt you?"

"No she didn't. In fact she took care of me. It was her who put the bandage on. She fed me too."

There were some other miscellaneous voices aside from the two that were distinctively male and female. Thinking I was still dreaming I didn't pay much attention until I heard things rattling.

My things!

My eyes popped open and I was fully awake. I craned my neck seeing Eddie just sitting there. That's when I realized my situation was worse off than when I went to sleep. My wrists and ankles were tied behind me. Making things even more uncomfortable was the rope that tied both sets together. Getting up was an impossible action.

I breathed deeply, trying to stay calm, hoping whoever was doing this would just find what they wanted and leave. I did worry how I was

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

going to get out of this predicament if I was left alone though. Eddie however was unconcerned, staring with calm, mismatched eyes.

"Stupid dog," I growled. "Why aren't you attacking who's doing this instead of just sitting there?" I tried struggling with the rope to no avail.

"They told me to stay here and watch you."

"And you're just going to do what they tell you?" I automatically answered, not realizing what was wrong with that moment. "You may be man's best friend but you're my dog and you're supposed to..." My voice trailed, my struggling slowing as the situation sank in. "You're supposed to..."

"Protect you. Yes, I know."

I lifted myself as best I could. Eddie looked back, his tail wagging.

"Please don't tell me that was you talking," I spoke under my breath. "I wasn't just answering you, right?"

The dog stared at me in silence, a heavy pause in the air.

I let out sigh. Okay. No talking. Here I was thinking I was going crazy.

"I tried telling them you didn't mean any harm but they tied you up anyway. The rats then told me to stay here and watch you or else they were going to leave you like this. I may be able to speak but I don't have any opposable thumbs so I did what they said."

FREEZE FRAME

I gave out a loud moan, banging my head against the ground. Eddie was talking to me and he just told me rats are responsible. I am going crazy!

I cried again. "I must still be dreaming! I'm dreaming... I'm dreaming..." I chanted those words while I hit my head against the sleeping bag. I just had to wake up!

But I didn't, because I wasn't sleeping.

Eddie put a paw on my arm in an attempt to calm me. "You are not dreaming. I just think it would be a good idea to behave yourself. Once the rats are finished they'll let you go and we can leave."

Not only was my dog talking to me, he was now telling me what to do. I just couldn't handle it. With a forceful thrust I turned onto my belly, kicking myself forward towards the opening. I was not going to wait for anyone to finish whatever then let me go. I wanted answers now.

"I think you should let me go out there first," Eddie pleaded. With one seal-like belly flop, I popped out of the flap, landing face first in the grass. The voices and rattling all around me stopped the minute I appeared. I spat out soil trying to raise my head, except something made sure to monopolize my attention before I could even get that far.

A sharp, cold object pressed against the bridge of my nose. It hovered deliberately between my eyes with not enough pressure to hurt me yet with just enough to show me that it could.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Slowly raising my head to focus my eyes, I came face to face with the biggest, meanest looking rat I have ever seen. Well, it looked big at ground eye-level.

The rat was a large hulking gray thing, standing like stone. He held a staff with the wicked looking blade pointing at my head. He stared at me with intense, alarming gaze, yellow shards of teeth exposed in a silent snarl. He wore a dark tunic, which made me wonder what surprised me more. The fact that he was threatening me with a weapon or the fact that he was dressed for it.

I heard a hiss escape the rat as he began to push the blade. I couldn't help but give out a yell in fear.

Eddie sprung forth knocking the wind out of me as he pounced on my back. The blade swung away, still close enough to take out my eye if the rat wanted. Eddie snarled, holding back on advancing on the prepared rat. He hissed even louder, swinging the blade in a more menacing manner.

"Enough!"

I gasped, burying my face in the grass. Eddie stopped his snarling yet still held a defensive stance.

"I told you she won't hurt anyone!" Eddie barked.

FREEZE FRAME

"It's okay, it's okay," a calm male voice answered. "She only startled us. Brutus, just go help the others. I'll take care of this." There was another pause as Eddie relaxed.

I felt a warm thick liquid run down my face. That little bastard cut my forehead open, I thought, holding back my anger. Now I'm really going to have to resist the urge to stomp him when I see him again.

I even knew his name. Brutus. Figures.

My camp gear was strewn all over the place. In just as many places were rats. Lots of them. Immediately I could tell these were not sewer rats by any stretch of the imagination. They were all dressed in every manner of tunics of all colors, poking and prodding through my things as efficiently as the park rangers did when I first arrived. As they did their tasks they spoke to each other just as Eddie had been speaking to me. And I understood every word.

A small hand touched my bleeding forehead, pushing the matted hair away. "I'm really sorry about that," the second rat replied. "Brutus has a habit of getting carried away. We'll clean that up for you."

"I would much prefer if you guys untied me," I answered finding myself relaxing at the thought of speaking to talking animals.

The rat stepped back, allowing me to look at him. He was smaller than the other rat Brutus yet he had an air of control about him. He was very slim, his sleek brown fur shining with health. He wore a dark blue

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

tunic with a pale yellow shirt underneath. Strapped to his side was a small sword, small compared to my size of course. Around his neck was a delicate, shimmering amulet, the red inlaid stone hypnotizing me even at its size.

"You must understand why we did this," the rat continued. "No human is supposed to be here. We naturally treated you with suspicion despite Eddie's protests."

It was odd hearing a rat call Eddie's name. "Obviously you two met." I replied.

Eddie leaned over. "This is Justin. He's the leader of these rats. They live here."

"Justin?" I repeated. "Okay, my name is Anna Carmichael. I'm a photographer on assignment just wanting to finish my job and leave. I accidentally came across your home. I don't want to hurt anyone. In fact, I think I saved one of you so you can at least give me some credit." With that, another rat hopped up to Justin with the aid of another. I recognized her immediately.

"It's true," she said coming to my defense. "The dog found me, convincing me to go with her. If she wanted to hurt anyone she would have done it by now."

FREEZE FRAME

"Actually I want to hurt the little creep that split my head open," I grumbled loud enough for them to hear. Eddie thumped me hard in the back of my head with his paw.

"She's kidding," he apologized.

I must have spent another ten minutes tied up halfway out of the tent until the debating rats felt secure enough to undo the ropes. Justin and several others did the honors, splitting the binds with quick slices from their swords. I still found myself controlling every move I made, making sure I didn't do anything to startle my new guests.

"So what is it that you guys are looking for?" I asked, pleased to see that they were putting everything back the way they found it.

"Your film," Justin answered, sending my heart racing.

"My film?" I stuttered. "What do you want with my film?" I had already spent two miserable days taking photos. I was not in the mood to hear that they were destroyed.

Justin sensed my panic. "Oh, no don't worry Miss Anna. Nancy already told us which one you used to take pictures of our home."

"Nancy?" My heart was still racing a mile a minute.

"The one you saved. We took her back to the infirmary to check up on her leg but you seemed to do a fine enough job with it. I can't thank you enough." I beamed with flattery.

"Wow. You guys have an infirmary?"

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"Among other things as you have seen already."

"Yeah," I laughed. "Who would have thought rats played soccer?" But I wasn't so easily distracted by this rat's charm. "Now what did you do to my film?"

Justin leapt onto my leg, startling me, then jumped to the plastic bag that held my garbage. "It's right here." He pulled the lip of the bag, revealing a tangled, shredded mess of undeveloped film. "I'm sorry but we had to do it," he explained. "We can't have you going home with photo evidence of our existence."

I'm sure a troop of talking rats would have that concern. I calmed down, accepting the film's fate. "That was the only one you touched, right?" I asked ominously.

Justin nodded. "Nancy assured us that it was. She explained how important the other canisters were so we left them."

"She was actually listening to me when I told her all that?" I remembered the moment. "I thought I was going crazy, talking to a rat and all. But why didn't she speak back to me?"

"I wouldn't exactly have called you cooperative once we did start talking to you."

I blushed, remembering how I reacted to Eddie. "It's not every day animals just talk to me out of the blue," I shrugged my shoulders. Then it

FREEZE FRAME

crossed my mind. "Why are all these animals talking to me now?" I posed the question to the rat who only shrugged himself.

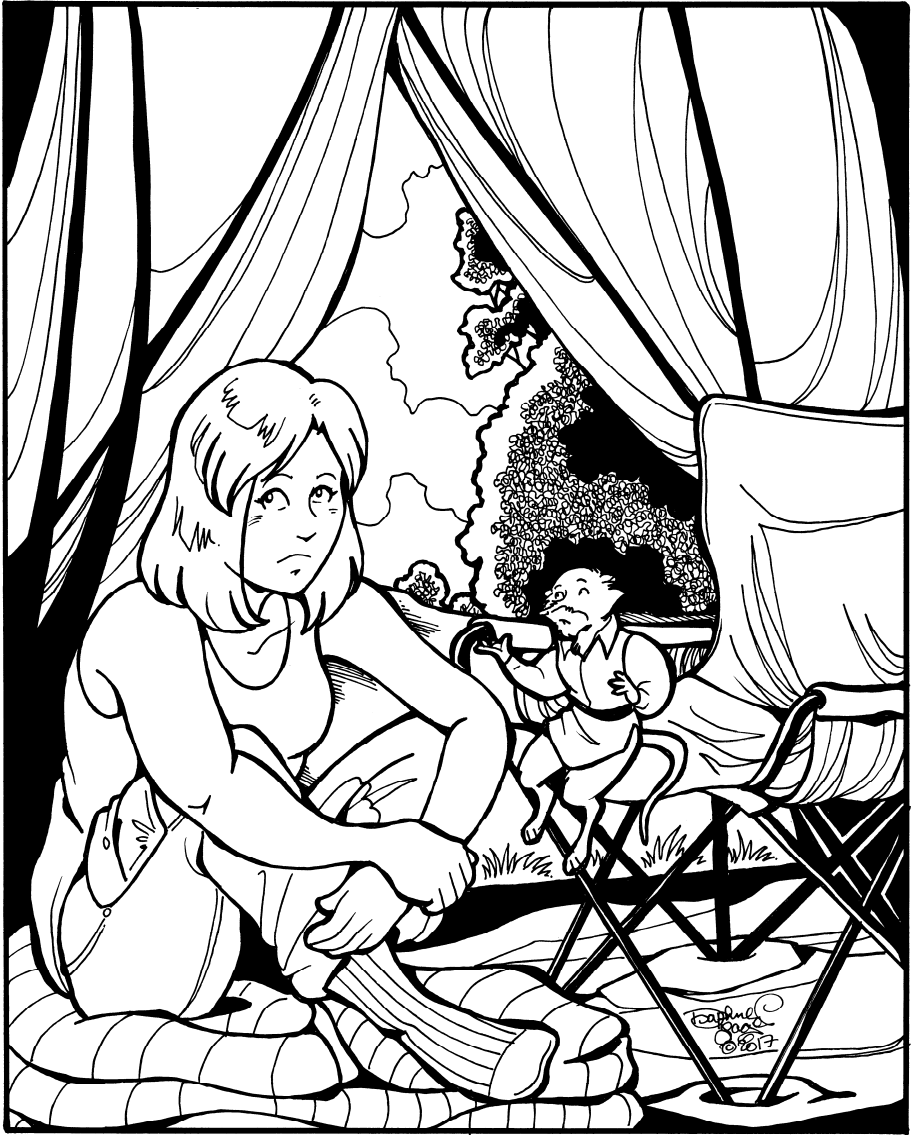
No one knew what was so special about this moment that even Eddie was speaking. The more I spoke to Justin, the more natural it seemed. I secretly wished that after the fourth day of my stay, whatever was happening would continue to do so.

"Oh, and by the way Justin. You can just call me Anna. Not Miss Anna or Miss Carmichael. Just plain ol' Anna."

"So I shall, Anna."

I was beginning to like this guy already. "Yanno, you're an okay guy," I said as I finally placed an adhesive bandage on my forehead, glad that my bangs partially covered it. "And you're pretty cute too, for a rat I mean."

I'd never seen a rat blush before until that moment. I laughed, patting him on the head. Justin laughed in return.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Righteous Mission

It was Eddie who gave me the most educated answer about the phenomenon before me. Animals could always talk. Every species of animal has a separate language. Related animals could communicate with each other with more ease than others. It was humans who never managed to understand anything.

This was way beyond learning a language, though. I had been immersed in a giant universal communicator, now able to understand any animal that wanted me to understand it. It was unnerving.

With every bird song I was now hearing words. With every animal call, I was hearing names. If I read about a situation like this in a novel I would have immediately dismissed it as magic. I believe less in magic than I believe in talking animals. And now animals were talking.

We settled on a compromise, the rats and I. They would allow me to finish my work in peace provided that I take no pictures of them or their lair. The rats also gave me advice and vantage points for some awesome pictures I would not have gotten otherwise.

To repay them I made it a habit of giving them food each time I made a meal. The granola bars were a favorite, as I'd always have a young

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

rat or two coming over trying to snag an extra ration. Nothing like a little sugar to make you a kid's best friend.

We went on with our normal routines acting like neither of us existed to the other. That lasted the whole of ten minutes before rats were lining up to watch me work. Every step of the way I had a pair of eyes on me. Even I couldn't help being distracted by these little "human" rats creating their living entirely from the landscape. I wanted so much to take pictures them and their amazing setup. Resisting the urge was difficult.

Justin endeavored to keep his people from getting too caught up with me. Regardless of what was going on they had much harder work ahead of them than I did. But the poor leader couldn't quite get everyone to cooperate. I reassured him that everything would get back to normal the day after tomorrow. Yet as much as it was uncomfortable for the rats to share the Valley openly with me, there was an unexpected benefit.

As dusk began to overtake the Valley, I was writing in my field journal, organizing canisters when a sleeping Eddie, without warning, snapped his head up.

His ears pointed forward, eyes focused in an area right outside of the farm area. I didn't see anything, as neither did the rat sentries posted. Eddie got up in a partial crouch, cautiously making his way towards the area of his malcontent. I put my pen down to watch the Border collie stop, sniff, then move some more.

FREEZE FRAME

"Eddie?" I called concerned, a sound that caught the guards' attention. The dog stopped, crouching even lower. He let out a low growl. As if it were a signal, the working rats dropped what they were doing and immediately headed inside their underground home. If Eddie was growling, there had to be a good reason.

Like a flash of lightning, Eddie jumped up in an ambush. His disappearance into the tall grass was followed by a yelp and a snarling too high pitched to be his.

I stood up with my flashlight shining, my heart thumping in my chest with worry. Eddie leapt again, barking a warning. With another snap another yelp echoed. A snarling, cat-like head popped up. Caught in the beam of my light, its eyes shone with an eerie glow. Turning away it scampered off with the barking Border collie at its heels.

The chase didn't last as the dog had no intention of killing his quarry. Satisfied he had scared off the fox Eddie licked his chops, proudly trotting back towards camp. I caught the sound of faint applause and cheering. Some rats had gathered on a high stone, watching the spectacle. They whistled and hooted, cheering the dog. Now that fox will think twice before stalking these rats again.

The dog came back to the camp gloating how he didn't have a scratch on him. "I bet the fox wasn't so lucky," I replied as I petted him.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"Oh, it only sounded worse than it really was," Eddie answered. "I have to give the fox some incentive to look elsewhere for hunting."

"I'm sure you did."

The rats, in their constant obsession with my campsite, came over to thank the dog personally for his courageous act. Eddie relished the attention. I smiled, excusing myself into the tent as I still had work to do. I didn't want to get too wrapped up. I wrote a couple of more pages when I heard the flap of the tent open. A sparkle of light caught my attention. I knew immediately it was Justin. No matter how little light there was the amulet around his neck never stopped sparking.

"Anna, I would really like to speak with you if I can," he said with all politeness.

I closed my journal, turning to my little companion. "Sure, I was just about finished anyway."

Justin jumped onto the aluminum frame chair, sitting down in front of me as it was more comfortable to speak at eye-level.

"I can't explain why supposedly random acts are occurring for the purpose of bringing you here but that's what seems to be happening."

I was already confused by his words.

Justin continued. "You see, Nancy was part of a team that was sent out to find truth in a rumor we had been hearing for about the past month."

FREEZE FRAME

"What did a little bird tell you, literally?" I asked, hoping to ease the growing tension with the bad pun. Justin only proceeded to look distracted and serious.

"There are people in these woods, people who are not supposed to be here. They've been leaving a trail of discarded skinned bodies as they move."

"Poachers?" I added. "There's a big rule against hunting and fishing in this area."

"So you can understand my concern, our concern. It was the reason we took such precautions with you this morning. We had to be sure you weren't one of them."

I unconsciously rubbed my wrists, remembering well. "So what did this party of yours discover?" I asked.

Justin's face grew long. "If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't know anything," he replied with sad disappointment. "Nancy turned out to be the only survivor. Even then that was close to not happening."

A gasp got caught in my throat.

"She told us all she knew. It seems the reason she survived was because she never went into their camp. All we know is that there are two individuals setting up trap lines and collecting bodies every morning. The team was caught rifling through clothing trying to find some identification as to who these people were." Justin paused. "They were shot."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

My lips tightened at the words. Justin noticed my conflict, stopping, genuinely concerned.

"I remember how Eddie was acting after I had the rat in my arms. I yelled at him to stop pointing wildlife out. Now I realize that he must have noticed the other wounded rats as well. I had left them there to die."

Justin placed his hand on my cheek. "Please, you could not have known," he said. "Judging from what Nancy had described, they had taken the worst of it. They were most certainly dead already. Don't blame yourself."

His soothing words made tears fall but they stopped just as quickly.

"So you thought I might have been one of them," I said. "Now I really don't blame you."

"We were terrified when we first saw you setting camp, even more so when we saw you carrying Nancy. Eddie didn't help matters either."

"So what happened then?" I asked all curious, sniffing. "You just walked up and Eddie let you pass?"

"Something like that." Justin shrugged. "He wasn't threatened at all. He was actually glad to see us because he figured we were Nancy's family. It was when we started to go through your things that he became a bit agitated."

"God forbid he try to stop you from tying me up."

FREEZE FRAME

"He tried to talk us out of it. We explained our concerns. He agreed to stay out of the way until we were done."

I sighed, a smirk crossing my face. "Some guard dog I have." I looked at the rat wondering what the point of the conversation was, not that I minded talking to him. "So, what does all this have to do with divine intervention for lack of a better phrase? You said that it wasn't coincidence I was here."

"No I don't think so. The fact that you're a photographer makes it even more so."

I could hear the request coming up. I resisted the urge to blurt what he wanted from me.

Justin stood on the fabric, puffing his chest out with his most authoritative demeanor. "On behalf of the Rats of Thorn Valley, I am making a formal request to have you search out these people to document their crimes. We do not have the resources to take on poachers and even less to prove to the outside world that they are even here."

My jaw dropped. "You want me to go chasing after poachers? Are you out of your mind? Who do I look like to you, Rambo? I hardly think they'll let me walk onto their compound, allowing me to take photos so that I can turn them in."

Justin noted my objection. "We would not put your life in danger like that," he said. "We know for the most part where they are. When they

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

are out checking their lines you can go into their camp. We'll warn you when they're coming back. Please consider doing this. If they come across you while you're working on your assignment, it will be as dangerous a situation regardless."

"And people don't care about a bunch of dead rats." I replied, weighing his concerns.

Justin paused. "I know of one who would, but not the way you would think. It's because of him that we are even here."

"Some day you will have to explain that to me."

"Some day."

Justin was right. Even if I refused the request, it would be dangerous having poachers in the woods with me. Poachers are not fond of witnesses to their crimes. This way, I'll be able to expose them to the public without getting myself into trouble, hopefully.

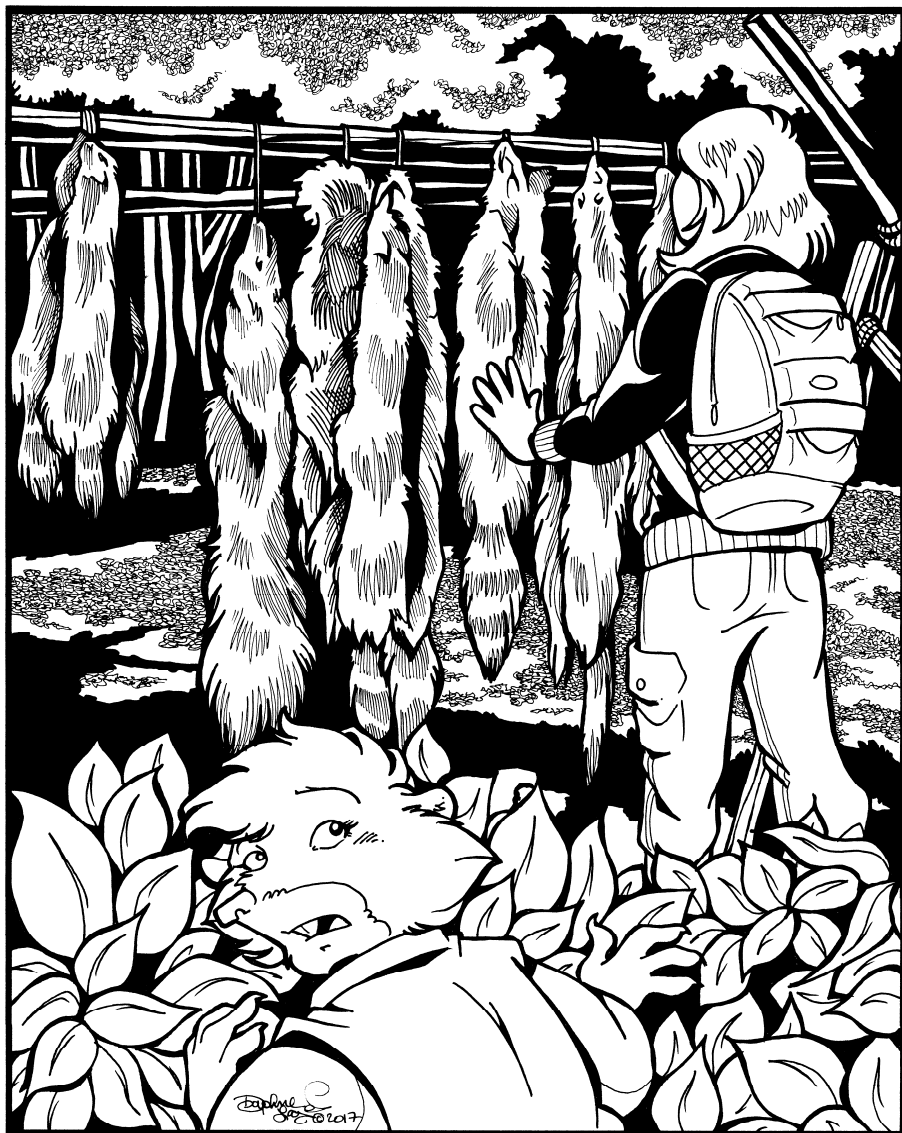
I started thinking about the implications of what I was considering. I would have to spend all day tomorrow doing this, which meant not enough time to collect more photos for my original purpose. Though if this did pan out, it would be more important than any article about wildflowers.

Poachers are ravaging our protected lands. What could be a more important reason to prove there needs to be a serious movement to keep our wilderness areas safe? And the thought of my new friends being

FREEZE FRAME

captured or killed was unacceptable. I was now morally obligated to accept Justin's mission.

"We'll start tomorrow," I answered, bringing a concerned smile to the rat's face. This may be the answer he wanted but we both knew we had a grim task ahead of us.



CHAPTER SIX

Lair of the Dead

I woke up earlier than usual to go through my gear, making sure to set up my camera with a fresh roll of film. I decided to keep myself as streamlined as possible, taking only the most necessary of equipment, namely my camera and myself. I didn't want to be burdened in case I had to make a quicker than usual getaway.

Butterflies danced in my stomach making eating a chore. Everything that went down only ended up like it wanted to come up again. I managed to keep what little food I ate inside where it belonged.

I felt I was still in a dream, a wonderful dream of talking animals and new friends. I realized it wasn't when Eddie asked me if everything was okay. Yep, my dog still talked. So far everything was exactly as I remembered it.

Calling to mind the promise I made to Justin the night before, I questioned my decision. I had enough photos to hand in to my editor to get paid. I could just pack up and leave. Maybe the poachers wouldn't come this close to the valley. If they did, so what? These were rats we were talking about. Even if they killed a few, who cares?

I cared.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

I couldn't help but care. These were no ordinary rats. They talked and acted like humans, building an entire sanctuary in Thorn Valley without anyone knowing. Except I knew and that made it my responsibility to protect it.

But why? I could pretend none of this happened. I looked at Eddie as I thought. If he continued to speak after we left, I would never hear the end of it, of how I abandoned the rats to their doom after they asked me to help them. That was all it boiled down to. Justin had asked me to get involved. I didn't have to say yes but I did. I agreed to do what they asked of me which amounted to what I was doing already, taking pictures.

This would be the only way to prove there were illegal activities being executed in the reserve. How safe would I be? The rats told me that the two men always went out to gather their kills the same time every day for at least an hour. That would give me more than enough time to take my photos and run.

What happened that the rat team that got ambushed? Did they overestimate the time? Did the poachers come back earlier than expected? Did they think that just because they were rats they wouldn't get noticed? Either way, I knew as much as I wanted to. I couldn't take the rats' word on the timing. I had to be extremely conscious to how long I was there, paying attention to any evidence that the men were returning to camp.

FREEZE FRAME

The more I mentally planned this, the sicker to the stomach I got. I should have said no and taken my chances.

Divine intervention.

Justin had implied that there was reason I was here and was able to understand them. Did I believe there was such a thing? Seemingly random occurrences coming together for a specific final goal?

Here I was on an assignment I hated and I end up meeting the most unusual people I will ever meet. Even My pet started talking, don't forget that. Then boom! The rats needed someone to document poachers. What better person than a photographer?

If this all worked out, the photos would create a story bigger than the whole reserve. Was that the final goal all these events were leading up to? Or was the final goal something that would happen sooner? Or later even? I shook my head. All these questions were driving me crazy. I had enough to do.

I felt like Gulliver sitting in the grass, surrounded by all the rats too curious to work while this plan was taking shape. I had unfolded my map of the Valley and surrounding area. Justin, with the help of another rat named Arthur, were marking out the path I was going to take.

The poachers' camp was still relatively away from the valley but still close enough to cause a lot of concern. I decided it would be best to leave Eddie behind, as his presence would most certainly tip off mine.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Nancy, despite some protest, volunteered to go with me. She knew the area best, also feeling she owed it to me. Justin organized another group to follow us closely but under no circumstances were they supposed to get involved. He did not want a repeat performance of the other day's tragedy. The less I had to worry about on this trek the better.

I saw my companion walk through the crowd towards me. The bandage was gone, replaced by a slight limp. She was dressed in a new tunic of dark green with pale brown sleeves, a dagger strapped to her belt.

"So you are Nancy," I announced, as she stood proud before me. The rat bowed, a totally unnecessary gesture.

"I can't thank you enough for what you have done for me," she replied. "If it wasn't for you, I would have never seen my family and friends again. I am eternally in your debt."

I felt my face flush. All this gratitude was becoming unbearably embarrassing. "If you ask me, it's Eddie that deserves your gratefulness more. Thank you anyway." With that, I held out my hand. The rat scampered up my arm.

Instead of my coat I wore a black hooded sweater. It was not as warm, but less noisy to wear. Thankfully it wasn't that cold to begin with. As I adjusted my collar she settled in the hood. Checking my camera one last time, I wrapped the strap around my wrist.

FREEZE FRAME

Taking a deep breath I stood, now even more a giant among rats. My lips tightened into an uneasy smile. It was time.

"For the Valley," I said under my breath as I tried to convince myself I was doing the right thing.

We hiked without speaking for about a half-hour, which was as well since I was too nervous to hold a conversation. Nancy was half lying on my shoulder, half in the hood, aware of everything around us. Her keen sense of smell told her that we were close.

"Be cautious around here," I heard the rat whisper in my ear. "Their camp is nearby."

Those words sent a chill down my spine. "How close are we?" I whispered back.

"Just over this next hill up ahead."

I walked a little bit more, picking up a burnt smell in the air. As she said, up ahead I began to see a small campground. I crouched in the bushes in case our timing was off.

I crawled as close to the ground as possible, inching my way towards the tents. Nancy jumped down with a small crunching noise under her feet. I held my breath, hoping it would not be the sound that attracted attention. All was still with no noise from the site. It was empty. I crawled forward a bit further then paused, peeking through the foliage.

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There were only two tents from what I could see. A small put-out campfire turned to be the source of the burning smell I caught a whiff of before. A loud rustling noise came from the opposite direction. I gasped, pressing my form flat on the ground, hearing my speeding heartbeat. I was facing Nancy whose size gave her an advantage.

She was standing upright peeking through the brush, her whiskers vibrating as she sniffed the air, her ears up to pick out the slightest sound. I watched her but dared not move an inch. The best I did was mouth, "Do you see anything?" hoping she understood me.

"It's all clear," she answered, looking at me. "It's only rabbits foraging. I don't smell humans around, other than you of course."

"How can you be sure," I whispered.

"Oh trust me. Humans have a very distinct smell, especially these ones."

I didn't know whether to be relieved or insulted.

Deciding to err on the side of caution, I raised myself, resisting the urge to brush off the leaves sticking to my clothes. I saw Nancy scamper up ahead into the campsite, trusting her instincts more than I did mine. I scanned the tents, open sleeping bags, and the smoke rising in a faint wisp. A cold feeling came over me however it had nothing to do with the weather.

FREEZE FRAME

I took the first still. I found it to be a lot more difficult than I thought. My hands were shaking which startled me. I had never had that happen before. I entered the camp taking in as much with my eyes as I did with the camera. The area was thick with an unusual stillness, or maybe it was my imagination.

Cigarette butts and wrappers littered the place. Sloppy they were, although at first inspection this didn't seem any different from any other campsite I've seen.

Feeling courageous, I opened the flap to one of the tents. I pinched my nose as I was greeted with the distinct 'I've been living in the woods too long' smell. I lowered myself to get in, making a note that the tent was larger than mine. A pile of dirty clothes sat in one corner, the obvious source of the smell.

Scattered paper was strewn throughout, which I found strange since these were not food wrappers but document paper. Trying not to disturb anything, I poked at them, attempting to read with what little light was filtering through the tent fabric.

National Institute of Mental Health, the letterhead stated. N.I.M.H.? I cocked my head in confusion. Why would poachers get letters from a government health facility? I scanned the page. It only spoke about how expenses occurred on the 'proposed project' would be accounted for in their budget and reimbursed accordingly. Signed a 'Dr. Shultz'.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

There was no other name save for that one which frustrated me. I wanted to at least have the name of the people who owned this camp along with the pictures. Expenses? Proposed project? All the letters were on N.I.M.H. letterheads.

I was about to pick them up when Nancy let out a small cry. It didn't alarm me as much as it made me peek out.

I saw Nancy frozen, staring into a turn I could not see.

"Did you find anything?" I asked as I walked over.

A long rope was tied between two trees several feet apart, nails pounded into the bark serving as impromptu hooks for several rusted traps. The wind blew the dangling chains, their slight ringing giving me goose bumps. Knives with blades longer than should exist outside a kitchen were stabbed into the tree, their blades encrusted with what I thought was rust. Then I moved my eyes over.

Hanging along on the rope were pelts of all shapes and sizes, most from foxes and bobcats. I could only guess how long it took to amass this collection. A quick count yielded at least thirty. Some of them still had the heads attached, their lifeless gazes staring upside-down back at us as they screamed with silent agape jaws.

Underneath the hanging pelts were still fresh bodies piled in a heap. They were sliced open from throat to tail yet still unskinned. The

FREEZE FRAME

grass was mottled with dark smears as large black-green flies swarmed around.

The whole setup stood like an obscene shrine. Tears welled up in my eyes making aiming the lens difficult. I felt Nancy clutch my jeans leg. I glanced down and saw her leaning against me, facing the other way.

"This wasn't here the last time we searched this place," Her voice trailed. She was obviously as upset as I was.

I was pressing the button on the shutter without even knowing how many pictures I had taken. The whole grotesque sight distracted me as I tried to smother the outrage I felt inside. The smell of blood and rot attacked my senses, the horrific, constant buzzing sound of flies delighting at their feast filling my ears. I couldn't control myself anymore.

I clutched my mouth as a rancid mixture of food and bile burst through, sending my sinuses aflame as it exited however it could. The camera dropped from my hands as I jumped away, violently vomiting up what little food I had in my stomach. Nancy ran over to me yet kept her distance. Now she had a distinct smell to remember me by.

In my panic attack, I did not realize how much noise I was making with all my coughing and retching.

As I lay on my hands and knees, tears rolling down my face and saliva dripping from my mouth, Nancy started to twitch, looking

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

nervously back and forth from me to the campsite. A wild, panicked look formed in her eyes.

I slowed my breathing enough to realize that there were sounds behind us. This time these were not foraging rabbits. My head snapped up as I heard the clanging of metal and two male voices talking. One voice got quiet then spoke with cautious anger.

They heard me!

My brain went completely blank as pure instinct took control of my body. I burst through the brush like a wild animal, not feeling the branches tear at my face and hands. My legs just kept running with no idea as to where I was heading. The only thing that mattered was that I got as far away as I could from that place. My lungs began to ache, my breathing became more labored but I couldn't stop running.

The ground disappeared from beneath my feet. I fell forward, hitting the ground with enough force to knock the wind out of me. I went tumbling, every twig, root, branch and rock taking their turn stabbing into me. Then everything stopped.

I don't know how long I was out. My eyelids fought the attempt but I was able to open my eyes. I felt something wet strike my face repeatedly, a cold nose pushing itself against my forehead.

"Eddie?" I replied with a weak, cracked voice. The dog let out a worried whine.

FREEZE FRAME

Several voices muttered all at once around me. I jerked up thinking of the two men, but my body won that contest. I fell back down, aching all over. "It's all right," Eddie answered with extreme concern. "You're safe. We're all here."

I lifted myself onto my elbows, seeing the rats all around me. I couldn't tell how far I had run. I deducted it must have been far enough that everyone felt safe to be by my side. Fresh tears ran down my face.

"No, it's not all right," I answered with despair in my voice. "I dropped my camera. I dropped my camera! How could I be so stupid? The piece of crap has a strap on it for a reason!"

I covered my eyes trying to keep the sunlight from aggravating the headache that was coming on with a vengeance.

Justin ran up, his brow furrowing with guilt. "This is all my fault," he said. "I should never had asked you to do this. Leave while you still can. We'll take care of the poachers on our own. I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not ending this here. I can't." I rolled up, sitting on my knees. "These guys, you can't believe how many animals they have taken. They're only going to take more. They're destroying everything. They have to be exposed and to do that I need to get my camera back."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

I tried standing up but felt dizzy. I stumbled, falling onto my rear. A collective gasp surrounded me.

"I'll set up a team to get your camera back for you," Justin said. Almost immediately rats began volunteering including Nancy.

"No!" I snapped. "If they found my camera they'll be expecting a return visit this soon. Also, we're not talking about some cheap Japanese automatic. This is a heavy, professional camera. You wouldn't be able to take it without attracting attention. And even if you were, you'll damage it dragging it through this terrain."

Everyone stood silent as we gathered our thoughts. Eddie pushed me in the back, startling me. "This place is only safe for now. We must return to the Valley before it gets dark." His fatherly tone made me not question his advice.

With great, slow effort, I forced myself to my feet, fighting my wobbly knees. Eddie knelt down and the group of rats climbed aboard, clutching his shaggy fur to stay on. Our walk was quiet the whole trip to the Valley, silent screaming still ringing in my ears.

I was a wreck for the rest of the day. If I wasn't sleeping, I was crying. If I wasn't crying I was cleaning and bandaging up all the numerous cuts and scrapes I acquired in my panicked sprint. Eddie kept vigil at the base of the tent, peeking in on several occasions to check up on me.

FREEZE FRAME

I couldn't get the image of the hanging and tossed carcasses out of my head. How could someone take a beautiful living, breathing animal, crush its leg in a trap, then go about ending its life like it was nothing? How much of your soul did you have to abandon in order to do that without flinching? No matter how much I tried to analyze it, I couldn't get it to make sense. All that carnage so some person could feel fashionable.

There was a rustling at the tent flap. Nancy walked in backwards, dragging a plastic food container with a sandwich and wild berries piled up on the side. The other end entered with Justin pushing, helping Nancy. I couldn't help but smile at the whole sight.

"I can't remember when was the last time someone made me a meal," I said, wiping my tear-streaked, puffy face. I tried composing myself for the two guests.

"We were concerned," Justin answered. "It was Nancy's idea to do this."

"It was Justin who recommended berries from storage," the female rat answered. "They're very sweet and should perk you right up."

I tried one, surprised at its freshness and robust taste. "Wow, you're right! These are pretty good. I'm so used to the freeze-out-the-taste variety from the supermarkets." I took another one. "You didn't have to raid your own stash for me. I have my own supplies and I'm leaving tomorrow for the most part."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"It was the only thing we could think of to thank you," Justin replied. "Especially with the amount of food you gave us."

"Enough with the thanks already!" I let out a loud laugh. "I'm thanked! I'm thanked! Though it feels like I really haven't done much other than lose my camera." I looked away, sad. "They're still out there. I still need to get my camera back."

I glanced over at Justin who sat down next to the plastic container. "Help yourself, if you like," I said as I picked up half the sandwich, biting in.

We sat in silence eating our food. I caught a twinkling out of the corner of my eye, realizing it was the amulet around Justin's neck. Staring at the gold ringlet with the red shimmering stone made me wonder what a rat would be doing with such an odd artifact.

"So Justin," I said as I swallowed a piece. "What is that thing around your neck anyway?"

Justin looked up then glanced down quickly as if he didn't know what I was talking about. "Oh, this," he said as he picked up the stone, staring at it with reverence. "It's a gift from a friend." His voice trailed, the amulet bringing back fond yet distant memories.

"It's obviously very special to you," I answered. "I don't think I've ever seen you without it."

FREEZE FRAME

"I wear it so much I almost forget I'm wearing it," the rat answered. "I only take it off when I bathe."

Nancy suddenly got excited about the conversation. "It's more than special," she piped. "The Stone holds deep magic. I've heard stories as to what it can do."

"Magic?" I skeptically replied. "Like hocus-pocus magic?"

"Not exactly," Justin answered sheepishly. "I've known two individuals who could call the power from the Stone. Only one of them was actually able to use it."

I took another bite from my sandwich. "What's the difference if they both could call the magic?" I felt stupid saying the word.

Justin searched his thoughts in an attempt to explain as best he could. "Our leader, uhm... former leader had a skill that no other had been able to recreate. He was able to tap into a natural force, I guess you'd call it magic, that he had great control over. He owned the Stone before giving it to Mrs. Brisby, a mouse. It turned out she could tap into the Stone's power yet even she couldn't explain it."

"So what happened to Mrs. Brisby?" I asked. "If she could tap the Stone, then why do you have it?"

"She didn't need it," Justin answered. "She gave it to me because she felt we would benefit from its power. I've yet to figure out how it works."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"You can feel it," Nancy answered. "Sometimes I get a tingling feeling all over if I stand too close to the Stone."

"I think you're imagining things," Justin answered modestly. "I don't feel anything special from it, although it has been glowing a little bit more than usual."

I gave out a chuckle. "I think that tingling feeling has more to do with the person wearing it than the Stone itself." I glanced over at Nancy who was blushing while Justin had an embarrassed look on his face.

"I... I wouldn't think that either..." Justin stuttered under his breath. Nancy gave out a small giggle.

Ah yes, Anna Carmichael - rodent matchmaker.

Eddie stuck his head in wondering what all the laughing was about.

"Come on in," I invited. "We were just discussing the finer points of magic, of all kinds."

Eddie panted happily as he bounded through the door, taking a place between the two rats. I broke a piece of my sandwich to give it to him so he didn't feel left out.

I don't know much about magic but I did know that holding a conversation with two rats and a dog was an experience I wouldn't trade in for the world. We talked and laughed until it was time for all of us to part ways for the night.

FREEZE FRAME

As Justin and Nancy left, I felt a little sad that the next day would be my last. After I got my camera back, or so I hoped, I would have to pack up, leaving behind the most unique friends anyone could ask for. I also knew that once I got back to civilization, I would never see them again. But then that was the reason they had chosen to live in Thorn Valley to begin with.

I thought back about something Justin had mentioned, that there was one person who would care if something happened to them but not in the way I would think. I wondered what meant. Then again his explanation about the Stone didn't answer anything either. If only I had the time to really get to know him and the rats history. I mean, magic can't possibly be the end all explanation for all of this, could it?

Magic.

I laughed at the thought. Why was it that I was willing to accept talking animals but not magic stones? I shrugged off the concept as I settled in for the night.

Magic indeed...

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Human Trap

A frenzied pawing shook my body, bringing me out of a deep sleep. I turned over to meet Eddie nudging me to get up, the concern in his eyes raising an alarm. Something was wrong.

"What's going on?" I asked the Border collie. "Another fox?"

Eddie whined again. "A fox I can handle. The rats awoke me with more pressing news."

I sat up. "Something happened to the rats?" I asked with frightened excitement in my voice. "They're okay, right?"

"Not for long if you don't do something," Eddie whined back. "The rats had gotten word that rangers are in the wood. We hoped the poachers had gotten their attention but they're moving close to the valley away from them. The rats will not fare any better with rangers than with poachers. You have to go to lead them away!"

As he spoke I stripped off the gray long johns, not feeling the usual bashfulness I get when dressing in front of the dog. I threw on my white tank top, jeans and boots, lacing them up with haste. If the rangers were indeed close enough to the valley, they would immediately zoom into my campsite, risking the rats to exposure.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

I had to lead them to the poachers, a much more important target. In fact, I planned to use the situation to kill two birds with one stone. The poachers would get arrested and I would get my camera back. I had to move fast.

Eddie bounded out of the tent with me following him.

All around was a flurry of activity with rats fortifying themselves against the impending threat. Woven blankets of twigs, grass and leaves covered their entranceways, windows and sports field. At best, the rangers wouldn't notice anything unusual, although the rats would have to take their chances with the gardens.

Guards armed with lances took hidden positions all along the perimeter more for surveillance than to pick a fight. A familiar voice called my name, causing me to turn mid-stride. Justin ran up to me waving his hands. I bent down, holding out my arm.

"I'm coming with you," he said. I was so distracted by what had to be done I didn't react to the initial pain of feeling him scratch up my arm.

"How do you know where they are?" I asked.

"Crows," was Justin's simple answer as he stood on my shoulder clutching my hair.

"There!" he cried, pointing upward. Frantic crow caws came from above. Three crows circled overhead waiting for us. "Follow them," Justin commanded. "They're the ones who know where the rangers are."

FREEZE FRAME

Digging my heels into the soft earth I ran into the wood, the constant crunching of leaves underneath us. I slowed our pace to avoid getting tripped by tree roots or low hanging branches.

Every couple of minutes, a flapping ebony crow would fly near us, cawing the direction we should take while his companions stayed above the trees.

"Slow down! Slow down!" the alarmed caw came. The crow landed in a branch above us, giving the last of his news.

"They're up ahead." The crow reported. "There are two of them on horseback. You can't miss them."

I nodded to the bird then turned to Justin "You might want to take to the ground," I suggested. "I don't think they'll take too kindly seeing me run up to them with a rat on my shoulder."

"Good idea. I'll follow close," Justin replied, scurrying into the bush.

I continued until I could hear the leaves rustling up ahead. Looking through the dense foliage, I made out two figures on horseback.

"Hello!" I yelled. "Over here!" I urged my tired body forward. Just as soon as I yelled the two rangers stopped, turning in my direction.

"Well, if it isn't the photographer lady," one of them started. "We were looking for you."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"I'm sure you were," I answered. "And boy am I glad to see you guys."

A crow landed in the trees near us.

The two rangers explained how they had seen smoke coming from the area near the valley. Campfires are not allowed to be set outside the designated areas so they came to investigate. Since I was the only one assigned to be there, they assumed it was me. Just as they finished explaining what they were doing, I started telling my tale as to who wasn't supposed to be there.

The rangers' faces became grim. Poaching in protected areas was a federal offense carrying serious repercussions. Not only were illegal hunters dangerous to the wildlife at large, they were also known to be dangerous towards people as well. They had to be stopped.

"I know exactly where they are," I replied. "The smoke you saw was from their camp. I tried taking photos but ended up losing my camera in the process." I felt mortified stating the last line. I still couldn't believe I was that stupid to lose my camera.

The two men nodded to each other. "You can lead but when we get near enough, we want you to head back to your camp. Camera or not, this can turn into a volatile situation. We don't want you getting hurt."

I nodded in agreement.

FREEZE FRAME

I felt relieved having the two rangers with me although I wondered how close Justin was. For a moment I was concerned about returning to the valley. There was still a chance the rangers would insist on wanting to know where my camp was. With any luck the poachers would keep the rangers busy so I could leave in my own good time.

We all heard banging and talking up ahead, causing all three of us to stop in our tracks.

"They're not that far," I whispered to the rangers. "Just go up over that small hill and their camp is there. There are three tents but only two men."

The older ranger dismounted from his horse first. "We'll handle it from here. Now get back and don't forget your own deadline."

"Yes sir," I answered. The second ranger dismounted, speaking into his radio to their base. Satisfied with how everything was turning out, I felt well enough to let the rangers do what they had to do. I only wished I had my camera to photograph the moment.

Following the rangers' commands I trotted in the opposite direction, my head filled with how I was going to explain this whole mess to my editor.

BANG! BANG!

The sudden noise made me jump. Birds took to flight in panic as a cold sense of dread filled my entire being.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"Anna?" I heard from the brushes.

"Justin?"

"I'm here."

The rat came out cautiously from his hiding place. He heard the sound as we did. We turned back, the rat lifting his head to sniff the air. I could have sworn I heard a low moan being carried in the wind.

"I smell blood," Justin whispered, the words making me shiver. "Something happened up ahead at that camp."

"We have to go back," I replied. "We have to see what happened."

"Are you out of your mind?" the rat snorted. "That was not a firecracker that went off. It's too dangerous. We must get back to the valley."

"No, I have to see if the rangers are all right," I answered, jogging a couple of feet.

"Get back here and let's go!" Justin pleaded.

BANG!

I fell to the ground at the sound of the third shot. "Uh, you're right, let's get out of here." I told my body to move but it refused to budge. I shivered again, able to turn but I couldn't take my gaze off the direction of the gunfire.

I shook my head and made my way towards the rat. I glanced down at him, noticing his eyes wide in fear as he backed slowly.

FREEZE FRAME

"What's the matter?"

Blinding stars filled my vision, the ground rushing up with a violent force. A crushing weight pressed against my back as my arms were yanked with painful strength behind me. I raised my head, giving out a yell.

My cry was greeted with a stomp on my head, pushing my face against the dirt. A tooth went through my bottom lip, filling my mouth with the taste of blood. I coughed as I started to choke on the metal tasting fluid.

My arms were pulled so hard, I thought they were going to end up dislocated. The pulling compelled me to my feet, my head swimming as I tried to remain conscious.

"Now this is probably the prettiest catch I made all month," the youthful yet surly voice replied in my ear. "So you're the one we missed out on yesterday," he continued as he tied my hands. "We figured you'd be back, just not with friends."

He wrenched the rope, causing me to flinch as it buried itself in my wrists. I glanced over at him through closing eyes but I could not focus enough to get a good look. All I could do was spit up blood on myself.

Attempting a last desperate chance, I lurched forward away from him, trying my best to foolishly run away. He didn't seem concerned with

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

what felt to be a valiant effort, especially when I ended up falling to my knees not a moment later.

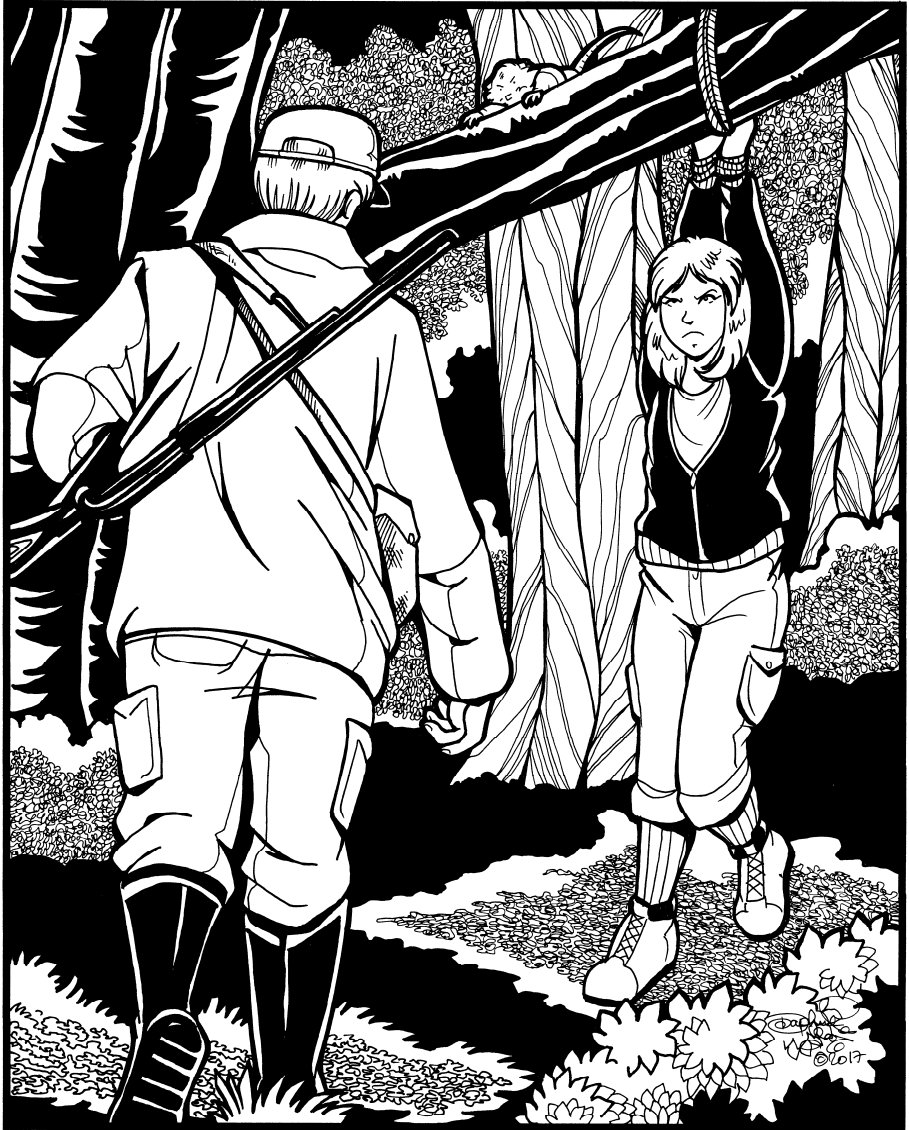
He came over and casually grabbed a fistful of my hair, pulling my head back. "You're going to be a problem, aren't you?" he replied.

"Go fuck yourself," I snarled weakly.

He gave a teasing chuckle. "Well, with any luck, that'll be your job."

He raised his arm, bringing it down with sharp impact. A hard blunt object hit the back of my head, sending me into complete darkness.

FREEZE FRAME



CHAPTER EIGHT

In the Dragon's Den

The sound of buzzing woke me from my blank slumber. I could feel a tickling on my chin then the familiar humming sound. I jerked my head trying to shake off the flies bothering me, attracted by the dried blood on the corner of my mouth. My bottom lip was swollen, throbbing with pain.

My disoriented state made it difficult to tell where I was. I was on my feet, that much I knew yet I was unable to move. My arms were tied above my head around a tree branch. Luckily I was able to lean against the trunk for support.

I took in slow breaths, remembering how I ended up in this predicament. I heard a groan beside me yet felt no fear from it. I turned my head slightly seeing my companion. The younger of the two rangers was strung up the same way I was except he did not have the luxury of leaning on anything.

I noticed the huge splatter where his shoulder was, his exhausted face revealing his pain. His eyes were closed, his breathing shallow.

Regaining my senses, I searched around from my precarious position. The second ranger was lying on the ground with his back

FREEZE FRAME

towards us, the slight movement of his blood-stained jacket revealing he was still alive, for now.

I studied the rope tied above me. I wiggled my arms, tugging to see if I could slip the rope somehow. It only caused the thick branch to bob up and down. The ranger next to me groaned.

"Stop it," he snapped. "I tried that already. The tree limb is too strong and so are the ropes."

I leaned back against the tree, sighing in frustration.

"Whatever you do, don't say a word," I heard the familiar voice whisper in my ear, causing me to glance over. Justin was hugging the tree as close as he could, using my form to camouflage himself from unwanted eyes. "I'm going up there to cut the ropes. Prepare yourself."

I was relieved to see the rat yet at the same time I wondered how someone his size could help me. This time I knew the poachers wouldn't let me just run away. They would come looking for me for sure.

Pausing, Justin dug his claws deeper into the bark then scurried up the tree as fast as he could. Just as he left my sight, the sound of other voices began echoing nearby followed by the sound of walking. The two poachers came into view leading the rangers' horses back into camp, the younger man especially thrilled by their find.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"Man. Here I was thinking we were going to have to carry everything back ourselves," he said. "Now we can pack everything up on the horses and we'll be outta here in no time."

The older, more stoic poacher tied the horse he was leading, ignoring his associate. Sensing he was being disregarded, the younger man continued. "We are getting out of here, right?" he asked. "I mean, it won't be long until other rangers start looking for us."

"We're moving but we ain't leaving," was the only reply.

"What do you mean we're not leaving?" sputtered the younger one. "How much more do we possibly need?"

The older poacher stretched his back, unconcerned by the protests. There was something cold about the way he acted unlike his more enthusiastic partner. His rough chiseled features only exaggerated his stiff demeanor despite being partially hidden behind a dark moustache. This was how he made his hard living.

"We still have a job to do," he answered.

A disgusted grunt replied him. "We still gotta do that? C'mon, Ray. It's bad enough we have to carry dead animals back, we gotta carry cages of live ones too?"

"They pay good money," the poacher named Ray answered. "They'll pay more if we bring 'em back alive."

FREEZE FRAME

The younger one shivered, making me curious. I remembered the paperwork I found in the tents. I wonder if it's N.I.M.H. he's talking about. I thought. I became infuriated at the reminder that these men were here because of a government agency.

I heard creaking above me. Justin, using his more rat-like talents, had started chewing through the ropes. In the excitement he had forgotten to pack his sword or anything that would have made the job easier.

The younger poacher reached inside his tent, pulling out a familiar item in his hands.

"Stan, will you stop playing with that stupid thing?" Ray barked. This time it was Stan's turn to ignore him. How they lasted a month in this wilderness without killing each other was beyond me.

He noticed my interest when I saw the camera, making an immediate bee-line towards me.

"Like I said, I figured you'd be back for this." Stan held up the camera. "Nifty thing too. You know the saying, finder's keepers."

He aimed at the ranger and me, pushing the button until the shutter snapped. One more still on the roll. "That's gonna make a fine souvenir," he said. "Not every day I catch fish as big as you guys. For obvious reasons I can't stuff you guys and mount you on my wall." He laughed at his joke.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"Let us go," the ranger next to me said. "It will only be a matter of time before other wardens come looking for us and find you."

"Oh yeah, like you and your friend did such a wonderful job," Stan replied as he snapped another picture. "I hardly think you're in a position to tell me anything."

He looked through the camera again, this time just to play around with the manual focus. "You know, I think I prefer the automatic cameras to something like this."

"And I prefer it if you'd shut your yap and help me pack this stuff!" Ray looked over to Stan as he pulled pelts from the line. His face and tone of voice was severe, but Stan took it all in stride.

Stan walked over, still fussing with the camera. If anything I hoped he wouldn't accidentally pop it open, ruining the film. With all the pictures he was taking, those would be the best evidence of all. Despite all the hard work law enforcement officials did, in the end criminals were always caught by their own stupidity. And nothing was more stupid than taking pictures of your own crime scene.

I looked up, seeing Justin crouched still. With Stan so close, he didn't dare make any move that risked putting me in any more danger than I already was. I watched the ranger on the ground. He was breathing slow enough before. Now I wasn't seeing any movement from him. The two men walked around the still figure as if he wasn't there.

FREEZE FRAME

It frightened me as to what was going to happen once they were no longer distracted with packing.

Justin continued working on the rope. I shook at my binds, hoping the extra struggle would snap the rope. All it did was aggravate the ranger, whose wounds had begun to ooze again.

"Will you stop that!" he snapped, trying hard not to yell loud enough to gain further attention. "What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to free myself," I growled back. "Maybe I can run off and get help. Where are your walkie-talkies?"

"Forget it," he answered. "They took them away. I certainly don't think you'll be able to get far enough before they shoot you."

"I don't think they mean to kill us," I replied. "If they did, they would have done so by now."

"Oh yeah? Tell that to Mike over there."

I looked over at the still body. As far as I was concerned he was still alive. I hung onto the hope that they wouldn't harm us.

"Hey, what are you two doing?"

Stan walked over, abandoning his work much to his partner's obvious chagrin. The camera hung around his neck like a medal. He came close enough for Justin to stop. This plan was not going to work.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"Well, I asked you two something," he said more sternly, this time coming closer than I had preferred. He went over first to the ranger. "Aren't you going to share with the rest of us?"

The ranger remained silent.

Stan turned, his stare making my skin crawl. "I guess your friend doesn't feel like talking," he started. "How about you? You got anything to say?"

"I think you should go back to your work before you get into trouble." I tried to avoid his gaze.

"Oh, I'll get to it when I'm good and ready." Stan pulled himself closer, his body beginning to touch mine. "So, what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" He leaned over, smelling my hair. I closed my eyes, hoping he wouldn't notice me shaking.

I hesitated to answer. "Uh... uhm... I'm a pho... photographer." His rancid body odor was causing me to choke. I swallowed hard to control it.

"So that explains the fancy camera," Stan answered, taking a step back, but not far enough. "You know, I don't know why you look worried. We're going to let you go when we're done. Just we have more important things to do right now."

I did not like the way that sounded. My fears were reinforced when he placed an arm around my waist.

FREEZE FRAME

"So, " he continued. "Aren't there more important things you'd rather be doing than hanging like this? A pretty thing like you?"

"Uh, yeah but not what you're thinking," I answered, cringing.

His eyes lit up as a small smirk crossed his face. "Oh yeah? What do you think I'm thinking?" He pressed me closely up against him. I let out a panicked gasp, something he enjoyed. "So how about giving me something to remember you by before I have to get back to work?"

He grabbed my face in a crude attempt to kiss me. I almost retched, giving out a hushed cry.

It was like he had gotten struck by lightning the way he jumped off of me screeching.

For an instant I saw a flash of brown, blue and pale yellow shoot down, lines of gushing blood appearing on his face. I fell back from the push, creating enough force to snap the half-eaten rope.

Even though I was expecting it my knees refused to cooperate. I fell to the ground, landing on my back. At the same time, Justin jumped off the screaming poacher. He ran over to me, trying to undo the rest of the ropes.

Stan held out his blood-stained hands away from his face, confused as to what happened. It never occurred to him that I would have a rat in shining armor ready to claw his eyes out.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

The panic was the last straw for an already agitated beyond limit Ray. "What the HELL is going ON?" he screamed. Stan could only look at him, two sprays of claw marks scarring his face. Ray walked over to a tree, grabbing a rifle leaning against it. With a determined stride he went over to Stan, violently grabbing his collar.

"How many times did I tell you just to do what you're TOLD?" he yelled. "But NO, you had to go messing around and this is what happens." With one move he struck his partner in the face, knocking him down. "Now I'm the one that has to go cleaning up."

The enraged poacher first went to the ranger lying on the ground. Still holding the rifle, he grabbed the jacket, dragging the groaning, wounded man to the middle of the camp. Dumping him like a trash bag, he then went over to the second ranger.

Taking the rifle in both hands, he rammed the solid wood handle into the ranger's stomach. The ranger buckled, blood spurting from his mouth. The poacher slipped a knife from his belt, slicing the rope, causing the ranger to collapse to the ground. With the same callousness shown the first, Ray dragged him to where his partner lay, dumping him next to the other.

Then he turned to me.

The man had such rage in his eyes he didn't even notice the rat beside me tearing at the ropes. My weak legs refused to run and I was

FREEZE FRAME

frightened beyond control. I stumbled, almost crushing Justin who jumped away in time. A blunt force hit the base of my spine, a scream escaping my throat.

He raised the gun again but this time I rolled out of the way, the handle hitting the ground. This only seemed to enrage him more. He grabbed the back of my jeans, pulling me towards him. He walked back towards the camp dragging me backwards.

I felt myself being yanked around, falling on top of the rangers. I scrambled off the men, ending up beside them. I was still trying to get up when I turned my head, watching as a black metal tube was placed right behind the first man's ear.

It was a sound I never want to hear again.

The shot didn't ring out like it did before. Instead, it exploded with a loud sickly thump as the ranger's head blew open, blood and brains splattering. I looked away as the rifle made its mark on the second ranger, I screamed when the sound came again.

I stood up only to have my legs swooped out from under me. The poacher put his foot on my back, pressing the air out of me. Sounds escaped from my throat that I didn't recognize, my screaming and moaning like that of a wild animal. The steel nozzle pressed against my head, right behind the ear as he had done so with the others.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Tears sprung from my eyes as I let out what I believed to be my final crazed moan. I closed my eyes tightly. Time seemed to stop as I waited.

"NO!"

I felt the muzzle slip but the shot rang out just the same. A bright explosion filled my closed eyes, white all around. I felt a sudden lightness as a warm wave of calm washed over me.

Then all went still.

FREEZE FRAME



CHAPTER NINE

Life-Sized Life

Being unconscious is a feeling I was getting too much unwanted experience in.

I remembered lying face down on the ground with a psychotic poacher standing on my back, a rifle to my head. That part was emblazoned in my mind with such detail I could still feel the gun nozzle behind my ear. I rubbed the spot to convince myself it wasn't there.

Then I remembered the rangers, shot down like the animals the poachers were after. After that, I couldn't remember anything. Tears welled up and flowed from my eyes uncontrollably, dampening my face.

I was supposed to be dead.

I closed my eyes, just concentrating on my breathing. I was lying down on my back, no longer outside. It was quiet with a warm glow of light right above me.

I stared at the light dangling from a wrapped green wire. The physical shape of the bulb struck me as odd, ruling out the idea that maybe I was in a hospital. Instead of a fluorescent bulb it was shaped like a tubular lantern attached to another set of lanterns connected by the same green wire. It ran all around the room illuminating the place in succession.

FREEZE FRAME

The irregular ceiling curved with some attempt at a level surface, its dark brown and gray texture revealing I was in some kind of underground dwelling. The strange room came more into view. The carved walls showed more interest from their makers for a flat surface but the jagged stone allowed for only so much.

I let out a deep sigh, sitting up, studying my surroundings. The room was cozy with several cots lined up against one wall, mine being one of them. Jars of various shapes filled with unknown liquids and powders were scattered on every shelf and table with obvious order to them. It looked more like an alchemist lab than a doctor's office. Either way, it certainly much better than the predicament I had been in just a few moments before.

Well, it felt like it was only a few moments.

I climbed off the cot, exploring the empty room with the strange furniture and even stranger concoctions. All the furniture was hand-made from found material in the woods. There were few metal tools and even they had a crafted look about them.

I felt a little uncomfortable snooping around so went for the nearest door. That part was easy since there was only one leading in or out. It was a rounded wood door with metal studs holding it together, a medieval design that strangely didn't look out of place. I figured the best thing to do was to go looking for whoever brought me here.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

I still had to reach the rangers' headquarters and warn them about the now homicidal poachers roaming the area. If they weren't dangerous then they were so now with bodies to prove it.

As I reached for the door, I was greeted by a figure standing in the corner. I jumped, startled by my companion.

"You're pretty big for a rat," I said, amazed at its size. "Could you tell me where I am?"

The figure did not speak instead continuing to stare. She was covered in light brown fur with an even lighter brown muzzle, wearing a white tank top and had shoulder length red hair.

"Didn't your mother tell you that it's rude to stare?" I replied. Again, there was no answer, but her mouth moved without saying anything. I walked towards the rat whose unusual size didn't quite register in my head. The rat should be about five foot five according to what I was seeing.

What a ridiculous notion. I've never heard of a rat that big. Of course not. That's because there's no such thing.

"Can you at least tell me your name?" I was determined to get an answer. The rat mouthed something only doing so when I spoke. I raised my hand to brush my bangs out of my face.

The rat did the same thing.

FREEZE FRAME

I froze at the sight. Disbelieving what was beginning to come together, I opened my mouth in an exaggerated manner, closing it quickly.

The rat followed suit movement for movement.

I raised my hand. So did my counterpart. My knees wobbled underneath me. In a vain attempt to keep standing I grabbed the table next to me, sending it over with me along with it. A huge crash echoed through the room as jars shatters and metal tools bounced with a ringing noise. I hit the dirt floor, my body shaking uncontrollably. That was no rat I was looking at and talking to. I was looking in a mirror.

I clutched myself, feeling the soft fur that now covered my body. My hands were paws with sharp little claws ending each digit. I traced the long muzzle that was now my face and the sensitive whiskers that sprouted from my snout. The moment was too surreal for me to handle.

I started screaming, tearing at myself. I didn't know what I was trying to accomplish except maybe to wake up from this horrible nightmare. I wanted to be home, back in my own bed like none of this ever happened.

In my fit, I didn't feel the two arms wrap around me. The crash has attracted whatever attention and they were now in the room trying to calm me down. I felt myself being pinned, more to keep myself from thrashing than in an attempt to do me harm.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"Breathe!" I heard a female voice yell in my ear. "Just breathe and calm down... yes... that's it... just like that."

With each word I slowed down into what felt like a catatonic state. My mind was blank, my only concern to not end up hyperventilating. The gentle, concerned female voice continued talking me thorough my panic attack until I was just a heavy breathing pile of nerves.

My eyes began to focus and that's when I saw the first one. He was a squat little mouse with scraggly yellowish fur that at one time may have been pure white. He had on a green and brown tunic with his face framed by a pair of thick, green glass spectacles.

He took my hand, feeling for my pulse, placing a crude stethoscope to my chest. My heart must have sounded like a hummingbird. The knock on the door sounded like drums in my ears.

"Just hold on to her until she calms down a bit more," the mouse said as he went to answer it. "She should be fine in a couple of minutes."

Fine? I thought. *Fine? This is fine?* I looked over to the person holding me. She was a gray rat dressed in a plain white tunic. She held me gently, rocking a me as if I were a child. In a strange sense, I was.

She smiled when our eyes made contact but no words came out. I was terrified to talk as if doing so would reinforce the moment. I didn't want it to be real. Making it so would mean accepting I was a rat of all things.

FREEZE FRAME

Why won't I wake up and get this over with?

The door opened with a slow creak, the mouse stepping outside into the hallway.

"Is she okay?" another voice asked. "I got word she didn't wake up in the best of moods."

"Physically she is fine," the mouse answered. "But considering the circumstances, I can't be too sure. We can only guess what's going through her head right now."

"Maybe I should go in and see her."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Like you said Mr. Ages. We can only guess what's she's going through."

There was an uncomfortable pause. "Just be careful with her."

The door creaked again, this time with someone coming in. At this size, no one looked familiar. The figure came over, kneeling before me. It took a while for me to realize who it was.

"Justin?" My voice was barely a hoarse whisper.

The rat smiled. "I was afraid you wouldn't remember me."

The memories started coming back in tattered fragments. "You pushed the gun out of the way didn't you? I... I'm dead..."

"Supposed to be," Justin answered. "I refused to let that happen. I did what I could."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

The nurse's hold relaxed, allowing me to touch my new face. "What happened to me?" I stuttered. "What did you do to me? What did you do?" My voice started to go up in pitch. "I am not a rat! I am a human being for Christ's sake! A human being!"

I clutched myself again, my claws digging into my arms. The nurse grabbed me and Justin pulled my hands away.

"Don't you hurt yourself!" Justin commanded. "I didn't do this to you. It was the Stone."

I stopped, staring at him through wide, tearing eyes. Satisfied that I wouldn't scratch at myself, he let go of my hands, reaching for something at the back of his neck. A golden chain appeared as he pulled the loop over his head. A gold ring with a red sparking stone embedded in the center appeared from under his shirt. He dangled the radiant jewel before me.

"The Stone did it," Justin answered softly. "I don't know how. I can't even tell you the precise moment."

I reached out for the Stone, feeling its weight in my hands. It felt warm to the touch and twinkled in the light. My distorted reflection appeared in the curved surface. I turned it over, revealing the inscription on the back.

You can unlock any door if you only have the key.

FREEZE FRAME

Justin continued. "All I remember is suddenly there you were no longer in your human form. I just grabbed you and ran off. I'm not sure if the poacher followed us or not."

Poachers. Now I remembered. And now they were the furthest thing from my mind.

"Will it change me back?" I asked, tears rolling down my face.

Justin shook his head. "I don't know. I have no idea how it works, only that it does. Maybe when the time is right, the Stone will decide."

That was not the answer I wanted to hear.

I sat on the floor quietly, still in shock from the whole ordeal. I didn't know which was worse, having my life threatened by poachers or remaining a rat for the rest of my life. I closed my eyes, breathing heavily.

The nurse rat let me go. She was a little unsure what to do next. One thing was for certain, I couldn't stay lying on the floor all night. Justin turned to the little mouse he called Mr. Ages. They walked over to the corner of the room, speaking low enough that I couldn't hear, not that I was listening anyway.

"I am so tired..." I whispered through sobs.

"Poor thing," the nurse replied as she helped me to my feet. "You're exhausted. We're going to have to find a proper bed for you. These cots aren't the most comfortable things to stay on too long."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Mr. Ages heard the nurse speaking. "I want her to get some food into her system first," he replied. "A little soup will settle her nerves." He then turned back to Justin. "Do you have someplace quiet she can stay in until morning? With all this broken glass that needs to be cleaned up, I don't want her to sleep here."

Justin nodded. "I arranged for Nancy to take her in, but it's too late to ask now. It's what, midnight? Almost one o'clock in the morning? I don't want to disturb her. I can take her to my room for the night. I'll sleep on the couch and she can have my bed. We can settle everything in the morning."

"First make sure she eats," Mr. Ages warned as he waved a finger. "I don't know what she did when she was human but she's a little on the skinny side for a rat."

"I'll have someone heat up something for her."

My new legs needed a little getting used to. The nurse held me up as I regained my balance. When I thought I was still human, I was walking around without a problem. Now that I knew I was physically different, I was having difficulty dealing with the adjustments.

"Do you need me to come along?" the nurse asked Justin as she led me to him.

Justin turned to me. "I'm not sure. Anna, are you going to be okay?"

FREEZE FRAME

The sound of my name snapped me out of my daze. I looked up at Justin then looked at the nurse. "I'll be all right." I answered. I was going to be as all right as I could be at the moment.

Justin turned to Mr. Ages for the last time. "I'll try to find some people to help you with that mess," he said.

"We'll just broom everything into the corner and save it for the morning. It's late enough already."

"Okay. Then I'll see you later."

We walked into the hallway as the door closed behind us. The corridor had the same carved cave look as the room did although not as illuminated. "Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Justin asked, still concerned.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay. It's going to take me a while to get used to this."

Justin took my hand. "A little food won't hurt. It's doctor's orders. I could use a little soup myself. C'mon, I'm sure there's someone in the kitchen working late."

As we walked through the corridor I couldn't help notice how tall Justin was. I was so used to how small he had been compared to my human size. Seeing him from this perspective was disorienting. When I towered before, I now barely reached past his chest. The insecurities that accompanied being in this awkward new body made me feel even smaller.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Once in a while he would look down, giving me a sweet smile. I found it difficult to return the gesture. I would instead look away extremely self-conscious about everything I thought I knew about myself.

We reached the dining hall, a cavernous room with high ceilings. The wide-open floor held numerous, scattered tables. The tables themselves varied in size, some only meant for two occupants, others for much larger parties. The setup calmed me down as I recognized it as a giant cafeteria. In fact, that was exactly what it was.

Although it was late in the night, some of the tables were occupied although not a fraction of what the room could hold. On one side of the room, a long, wide counter separated the hall from the kitchen. At the end nearest to the entrance were stacks of trays with racks of utensils.

We walked to a small table closest to the counter, Justin oblivious to the stares we were getting from the other rats in the hall. Well, of course he'd be oblivious, it was me they were staring at.

Justin pulled out a chair, urging me to sit. "I'll go ahead and get something for the two of us," he said. "I'll be right back."

"Okay," I answered as I watched him leave, folding my hands on the table. Twiddling my thumbs, I glanced out of the corner of my eyes trying to see my staring, whispering public without looking like I was bothered by it. I let out a nervous sigh. Swinging my feet, I looked up at

FREEZE FRAME

the hanging lamps illuminating the room with a soft glow. The tiny flames flickered in their glass houses.

"Here we are." Justin placed a tray down on the table. He placed a bowl in front of me, its hot contents making my stomach rumble. The soup was thick and white with pieces of grain and parsley garnish mixed in.

"It's barley soup," he answered, noticing me trying to figure out what it was.

"Hey, I had barley soup before," I said as I picked up the wood spoon, blowing on the soup to cool it off. Much to my surprise it turned out rather delicious leading me to quickly finish the bowl. My stomach felt all warm and comfortable.

On the tray were two bread rolls and I helped myself to one of them. As I completed my meal, I leaned back in the chair, feeling calm and sleepy instead of just tired.

Justin smiled, satisfied by the results. "So I take it our food was a success," he said, finishing off his own bowl. "It always tastes better when you get it fresh though. The kitchen stays with a modest supply during the overnight."

"Oh, it was fine," I answered. "A little bland yet I don't think I could have handled anything else. Now I could use a good night's sleep."

Justin gathered everything up onto the tray as we both stood ready to leave. As he went back to the counter to return the tray, I caught a few

rats quickly turning back to their own food. One rat looked back at me, waving his hand slightly in greeting. In my now better mood, I raised my hand returning the salutation, flashing a grin.

"Let's go?" I heard Justin say. I turned to him nodding.

With my hunger sated and my mind somewhat at ease, I began to notice my surroundings better than before. Justin took a little time explaining that if I needed anything all I had to do was ask anyone. Very few places were forbidden except private living quarters and areas still under construction. Other than that I was welcome to use every public space in this community.

"Well, enough of all that," he said as we stopped in front of a door. "It's late enough as is."

I couldn't have agreed more.

He opened the door, gesturing me in first. The room was smaller than the infirmary but just as cozy, if not more so due to its size. The room was furnished with simple cabinets, shelves and an overstuffed easy chair and sofa.

Along one wall sat an old, large desk made of dark-stained wood. The desk was elaborately decorated, out of place in its simple surroundings. On its surface was a sea of papers, pens and pencils. Seems even rats have problems keeping up with paperwork.

FREEZE FRAME

Justin closed the door, making way to another on the opposite wall. "This will be your room for the night," he said, opening it. "I'll take the sofa."

I hesitated at his words. "I can't kick you out of your own bed. I'll sleep on the sofa."

Justin would not hear a word of it. "No, you are my guest and guests should get a bed. One night on a sofa will not kill me."

He lit a small candle next on a nightstand I entered the room. The sight of the plush comforter and soft looking mattress made me sleepier than I was before. Yes, Justin can sleep on the sofa.

As I crawled into the inviting fabric, Justin rummaged in a closet pulling out an extra set of blankets for himself.

"I'll be out there if you need anything," he replied. "Good night, Anna."

"Good night, Justin."

With a tired smile, he pulled the creaking door closed, sending the room into darkness save for the candle. Pulling off the tank top, I leaned over, blowing out the flame.

Since this trip started I never managed a good night sleep. Now I was going to relish every minute of it.



CHAPTER TEN

Reborn

I slept unusually well that night. The large bed was luxurious in its comfort, the thick mattress almost engulfing my form. Sunlight from the window woke me from my slumber with its welcoming warmth. Realizing I couldn't stay in bed all day much to my disappointment, I sat up rubbing my weary eyes. I looked around the sparsely decorated room, a chair catching my attention.

Over the back was a pile of neatly draped clothing, my tank top nowhere to be seen. Walking over to the chair I studied the tunic and shirt. The fabric was coarse woven cotton dyed a deep purple. The separate shirt was soft and folded lightly in my hands. The ensemble was finished off by a black leather belt, which made me curious as to what they used for raw material.

At first I thought they belonged to Justin, but the size was too small. Not wanting to take the clothing without making sure they were for me, I opened the door, peeking out into the main living area.

The sofa was empty except for blankets neatly folded and tucked to one side. I walked out, not concerned about my nakedness. I was

covered in fur. How could I be naked? I guess the rats use clothing more to accommodate their human sensibilities rather than actually needing them.

On a side table next to the sofa was a tent-folded piece of paper with my name scribbled on it. I picked it up and started to read.

Dear Anna,

I apologize for not being available when you finally wake as my leadership duties are always calling me. The clothing left by the bed is yours. I hope you like them. Please feel free to use any of our facilities at your disposal. I look forward to meeting up with you later in the day.

Justin

How sweet of him, I thought. I get a new body and new clothes. I placed the paper back on the table, returning to the room.

The new look was strange as if being turned into a rat wasn't strange enough. In my new tunic I looked like I had walked out of a cartoon. It would have been funny if it wasn't really happening. My rumbling stomach reminded me that all I was running on was a bowl of soup and a roll. I had yet to have breakfast.

Hmmm, I wonder if that cafeteria is still open? Looking forward to a hearty meal, I walked over to the main door of the room. As I was about to grab the handle, a slight panic stopped me.

FREEZE FRAME

"Wait a minute," I spoke out loud to myself. "This is not normal. I don't know anybody here except Justin and he's nowhere around. What if these rats are hostile?"

I shook my head in disbelief. Why would the rats' change now that I wasn't human anymore? The friendly wave given to me last night was proof that their intentions are good. I took a deep breath. It was time to socialize with the masses. I couldn't let a panic attack convince me of otherwise nor could I afford to become a hermit. I needed these rats more than ever, if not for help, then just for the company.

The corridor was empty however the bustle of activity echoed from both ends.

Smoothing out my tunic and running my hands through my hair out of nervousness I took the first brave steps. I remembered the direction we took from the cafeteria and reversed them, retracing the steps. I did not want the embarrassment of getting lost my first day here. As the corridor opened into a large hub, I came across my first rats.

The cafeteria was a popular place this time of morning. Many were still nursing breakfast drinks and snacks as they went to wherever they were going. I thought I fit in rather well. The minute I appeared though, everyone stopped with all attention on me. From what I could tell, I was the only one with a mop of red hair on their head, the only physical

characteristic that pointed I was once human. I felt self-conscious but not threatened which was a good sign.

"Good morning," I said hoping to break the tension.

"Good morning," many of them answered back with wide smiles.

I could smell the hot, fragrant food in the air, telling me that I was near my destination. My stomach rumbled, my pace speeding as a result. The dining hall came into view although it was not the empty, quiet place it was several hours ago. The place was jam-packed with rats talking, laughing, eating and all just having a good time before work. I fought the urge to run back to Justin's room.

"Anna, is that you?"

I perked up at the sound of my name. A female rat came running over, a slight yet noticeable limp jarring the memory from my head.

"Nancy?"

"Oh! I can't believe it's true!" she squealed, putting her arms around me. "When Justin told everyone that the Stone had turned you into one of us, even I didn't believe it. I told you it had power."

"You can't believe it," I answered, reining the sarcasm as best I could. "I'm still waiting to wake up."

Nancy laughed. "So what are you doing here?"

I scratched the back of my head. "I was hoping to get something to eat but I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed."

FREEZE FRAME

Nancy took my arm. "Luckily I just got here myself so we can get some food together. I'll give you the tour while we're at it."

"Sounds great."

It didn't take me long to get into the routine of being surrounded by rats, never mind being one of them. It was strange finding myself settling in as well as I was. It concerned though. I had a nagging notion not get too comfortable. I made a conscious effort to make sure that feeling did not disappear.

Nancy played goalie as the rumor of a human turned rat spread throughout the colony. Many curious souls came to find out for themselves if it were true. Despite the Stone's known magic it never manifested since some incident with a mouse named Mrs. Brisby. Not even Justin, their own leader, could make the Stone work. Now I was miracle number two. Needless to say, interest was high.

As breakfast waned, so did the fascination with me, not that I minded. The feeling that I was some kind of circus freak was wearing thin.

We watched the cafeteria empty out with rats dressed in simple white smocks starting their cleaning routine. Despite their care in cleaning up after themselves there was still a need for a cleaning crew to handle what was missed or left behind.

As we got up to leave, a dark figure made his way across the cafeteria, a pile of papers in his hands. He was a bit away from us, still I

noticed his sleek elegance. His shining fur was black with light gray points highlighting his hands, feet, and muzzle. A maroon tunic with a cream color shirt, blazed against his dark fur.

"Ahem," Nancy coughed, not needing to clear her throat.

"What?" I said, not noticing I had been staring.

"Well, I guess you're not having problems with your new self if you're already scoping out the males."

"WHAT!" I groaned. "I wasn't scoping!" I hoped she could not see me blushing through my fur.

We made our way to the exit, opposite the direction the black rat had gone. Nancy leaned in closer. "By the way, you do best to avoid him anyway," she said with all seriousness.

My ears perked at the suggestion. "Why?" I asked. Not that I was planning on meeting him but Nancy's sudden change in tone piqued my curiosity.

"That's Jinnai, one of the guards. A lot of us just avoid him."

"No offense, but that doesn't tell me anything," I answered. "All he did was walk across the cafeteria with papers in his hands. I would hardly call that dangerous unless you're worried about paper cuts."

Nancy sighed, trying to find the words to explain this. "Well, he's not dangerous as far as I know personally. His father killed our original leader, almost murdered Justin if it wasn't for Mrs. Brisby and he would

FREEZE FRAME

have killed her too if given the chance. You must know the saying about the apple not falling far from the tree."

"This guy's father must have been a psycho. What happened to him?"

"He was killed at the hands of a henchman. Justin only made Jinnai a guard because his mother pleaded with him to do so. As far as I know not even Justin trusts him much."

"Because of his father?"

"Yes."

I felt sorry for the rat already. No son should bear the weight of his father's sins, but I didn't know that for sure either. Maybe he was just as psychotic. Or maybe everyone was just taking their hatred of his father out on him. Either way, with the speed everyone learned about me added with the rumors about avoiding certain people, I found the rats as gossipy as a knitting circle.

From the library to food storage, to a concert hall, I was given the grand tour of the entire compound. It was amazing what these rats accomplished in the middle of the wilderness. Nancy proudly gave me a history lesson of every room and hall, explaining the hardships they met the first several months of their stay.

At first I hardly recognized Justin as we turned a corner. His face was serious, his body posture rigid. His whole demeanor exuded authority,

totally opposite to the relaxed, mischievous rat I remembered. When he turned and saw us coming down the hall, his face changed to the kind savior I remembered.

"Anna! Nancy!" he called. "I was afraid I wouldn't see you until later tonight. So how do you like our home?"

I smiled with excitement. "It's magnificent. I would have never had guessed that all this was here."

"Yes, we are very proud of this place," Justin answered. "To think it almost didn't happen but here we are." The papers in his hands ruffled as he waved them.

Turning back into 'fearless leader', Justin faced a group of rats exiting the meeting room behind him. He spoke to them briefly, returning the pages back to them. The last rat to get his pages was the black one in the red tunic.

"I was just looking over reports from my guards," Justin explained as he turned back without looking at him. I on the other hand was trying to get a discrete, better look. Jinnai walked off giving a slight backward glance that I happened to catch.

Finished with his debriefing, Justin clapped his hands, returning his full attention to us. "Now that's out of the way, I want to show you something that I'm sure you'll appreciate."

FREEZE FRAME

"I can't imagine what more you can surprise me with," I answered. Justin gave me a wide, teasing smile.

Following through a maze of corridors, we reached a large storage area. All sorts of grains, nuts, berries, and other foodstuff were neatly piled in open burlap sacks for easy access. Another section housed raw materials like wood and fabric. We passed over to a third section where miscellaneous items like wire and scrap metals were stored. One huge item immediately caught my attention, bringing tears to my eyes.

It was my camera.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Odd Man Out

A squeal escaped my throat, Justin laughing with amusement. I ran my hands over the black textured case and the cool metal, still not believing it was here instead of hanging around a repulsive poacher's neck. The fact that the camera was now as big as I was didn't faze me. All I cared about was that it was safely back where it belonged.

As I turned to face Justin and Nancy, another sight greeted my eyes. Next to the camera, piled up in neat rows were black film canisters. The rats had saved everything.

"How did you... When did you get this?"

Justin couldn't help but beam, pleased with the decision he made. "After the incident we kept a close eye on the poachers. The older one lost patience with his partner and threw the camera away as punishment. When we felt the area was safe a group was sent to retrieve it. The film inside is still intact."

My heart suddenly felt heavy as he spoke whatever joy suddenly waning. If the rats were able to retrieve the camera then my futile attempt at doing it myself was all for nothing. Justin and Nancy saw the change in my demeanor.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"I killed those rangers," I whispered, leaning on the camera. "I should have taken you up on your offer in the first place and let you arrange to get it. But I had to do it myself and now two men are dead." My mind replayed the horrible events.

Nancy placed gentle arms around me as Justin rubbed a supportive hand on my back. "It's not your fault," he said. "You did what you thought was best. There was no way those rangers could have known the poachers were that dangerous."

Nancy continued. "If the rangers thought they were in danger they would not have confronted them. Even if you weren't there, they would have come across them anyway."

Their words made me feel a little bit better, but not by much. I pulled myself away, wiping my face to compose myself.

"I think we've spent enough time in here," Justin said trying to change the subject. "I want to take you topside for one last thing."

Justin had arranged for my tent and camping gear to be packed and hidden. As a human I had difficulties putting everything away. I could only imagine how long it must have taken the rats to carry out the same task. Although after seeing the immense infrastructure they were able to create for themselves, nothing seemed impossible.

Rats were finishing their outdoor chores as we exited into the cool evening air, passing tired workers filing their way inside. At Justin's

FREEZE FRAME

insistence, we scrambled onto a rock overlooking the entrance, the final surprise of the day revealing itself.

Seeing the camera didn't shake me up as the initial run into the infirmary mirror. I thought I was getting the hang of being a small, furry pest animal until A massive black and white mountain of fur cautiously came up to us. There was as much disbelief in his eyes as were in mine.

"Oh my gosh... Eddie?" I cupped my hands over my mouth.

The dog blinked hard, looking at me, his nose taking in whatever scents he could get. I couldn't get over how huge he was, making me wonder how Nancy didn't die of a heart attack the first time she saw him trying to dig her out.

"Wow," Eddie started, cocking his head the way only dogs can do. "I wasn't sure if I understood what the other rats were trying to explain." He took another hearty whiff. "Your smell is the same. It is you. At least you're all right. I was afraid something horrible had happened."

"No, just something really strange," I replied. I was still overwhelmed by how the Border collie looked from this perspective.

Eddie's ears pointed forward. "How long are you going to stay that way?" he asked. "Are we ever going to go home?"

Sadness sunk my shoulders. "I don't know. It seems I'm at the mercy of some magic no one knows how to control. For all I know, this is how I'm going to be from now on."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Eddie let out a little whine. This was confusing for the both of us. With nighttime approaching it was time for me to say good-bye to my canine companion. As resourceful as the rats were it was still very dangerous to be outside at night as predators started to make their rounds.

I could feel the dog watching me as I climbed down the rock, feeling his apprehension as well. How long could a domesticated animal live in a wilderness valley? And more importantly, how long could I remain a rat before I started going insane?

The walk back was silent as the seriousness of my dilemma sank in. Instead of the unrestrained panic I felt in the infirmary, it was a painful pang eating away at my insides. I was not a rat no matter how comfortable Justin and Nancy made me feel. I was now more afraid of this new body than I was of the poachers. For a split moment I wished Justin had let me die.

Justin tensely rubbed his eyes. The meeting did not go the way he thought, the happy occasion that comes with realizing that your friends are okay. Fresh wounds were torn open with the pain fouling the air.

"Uhm, look, why don't we call it an early night?" he said apologetically. "I still have several things to look over but you can stay with Nancy. In fact, we set up her room so that you would have a bed of your own there."

FREEZE FRAME

"We're going to be roommates," Nancy chirped, trying to cheer me up.

I gave a weak smile. I was so full with thought I could barely hear what anyone was saying.

Nancy's room was small yet comfortable, the same size as Justin's. Without his clutter it looked much larger than it was. We sat in the living room where I learned a little bit about my new roomie.

Nancy was studying to be an engineer, apprenticing with Arthur, a rat that I had met briefly. Arthur was responsible for most of the compound's design, overseeing its construction and maintenance. She was lucky to be able to live apart from her large family in her own room. Well, not anymore with me around, but she didn't mind.

Nancy returned the venture at small talk by asking me about what I did, only to end up visibly upsetting me. It was going to take a while to get used to the fact my previous life wasn't relevant anymore.

Justin said the Stone could change me back, the part about when was less than clear. I was afraid to accept that it might never happen but it seemed I didn't have a choice.

My new bed was no different than Justin's. This time no comfort was gained by its softness. Nancy slept in a similar bed across from me. I spent several hours just tossing and turning. When I wasn't doing that, I was staring at the stone ceiling.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

What am I going to do? I can't possibly think I can live here without earning my keep somehow. It will only be a matter of time before the novelty of my existence melts away revealing a rat taking up space and resources. Then what? The rats don't have a desperate need for a photographer.

My camera was safe yet unusable. I couldn't lift the thing on my own, much less take photos and develop film. There was no practical use for my knowledge unless some clever rodent created a camera for me using twigs and string. Well, technically all I would need is a box with a pinhole but without any type of film that's all it would remain.

I sighed, frustrated that I was mentally exhausted yet unable to fall asleep.

A small grumble distracted me. I wasn't that hungry that I couldn't wait until morning yet not sleeping wasn't helping me either.

The cafeteria. Yeah, that would at least give me something to do. Maybe just the walk around will tire me out enough so I can get a couple of hours rest.

I avoided rustling the sheets or shaking the bed too much. Grabbing my clothes I crept into the living room, lighting a small candle. I put on the light purple shirt deciding there was no reason to get dressed up just to go snacking. Leaving the rest of my clothes on the sofa, I blew out the candle, making my way out.

FREEZE FRAME

The hallways were quiet, nothing unnerving considering it was rather late, or early depending on how you looked at it. Much to my relief there was someone still serving food. At least eating would give me an excuse for being there rather than twiddling my thumbs to pass time.

With tray in hand, a hot bowl of soup, and two rolls next to my bowl, I made my way to the numerous empty tables. I was planning on grabbing the first closest seat until a lone soul caught my eye.

The black and gray rat sat at the farthest corner table with his back facing the room. Despite the emptiness of the cafeteria, he was trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. He sat quietly with a book in hand, his calm demeanor contradicting the sociopath stories floating around about him.

Intent in his reading, he didn't notice me coming closer, passing chair after empty chair, to sit at a table a couple of feet away.

I chose a casual arrangement to not draw suspicion, even deliberately watching how I ate. With each spoonful of soup I glanced over at him, at first to figure out what book he was reading. That proved to be futile as the bound cover had no writing on it save for a simple decorative illustration on the front.

The few other rats in the room were busy doing their own things, uninterested in what I was up to. I felt self-conscious either way. Remembering the stories, I compared them to what I noticed. It all seemed

a bit hard to believe as I thought I was a good judge of character. He didn't seem different than any other rat I met in this place. Whatever horrors his father was responsible for I suspected they were being cast on him quite unfairly.

Determined to find out for myself, I picked up the tray with my two rolls, taking it over to his table. He didn't notice me at the empty chair opposite him. Absorbed, he continued to read. Taking the plunge I made the first move.

"Uh, hi," I said, my voice cracking to my surprise.

Jinnai hesitated not realizing someone was speaking to him. His ears twitched then his eyes raised, their icy blueness causing me to gulp.

I gathered the courage to continue. "Uhm, uh, I was wondering if you'd like to have my extra roll here. I was only supposed to have one but they gave me two by mistake." As I spoke, the rat looked to both his sides in a confused manner. I couldn't have possibly been talking to him. "I was hoping you would take it as so it doesn't go to waste," I finished.

Jinnai looked up at me again, this time with an uncertain sheepish smile. "Uh, sure... sure..." he said softly, still confused by my speaking to him.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" I asked, placing my tray on his table.

He became flustered. "Do you want me to leave?" he asked. "I was just finishing up here."

FREEZE FRAME

I couldn't help being humored by his awkward shyness. "If I wanted to sit alone I didn't need to bother you for it. This place isn't exactly crawling with people." I sat down smiling at him, handing him my second roll. He stopped, staring at it.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"It's your roll. My second roll?" I pushed the piece of bread closer to him. "I offered it to you?"

He let out an embarrassed laugh as he took the bread. "Uh, I'm really sorry," he said. "I'm not used to anyone sitting here... with me... I'm used to being alone."

The sound of his youthful voice cheered me up from my slump. "That's okay," I said, leaning back in the chair. "I'm new here so I don't know everyone's quirks yet."

"Yes, I heard about you," Jinnai nodded. "You're the camper that the Stone changed."

I resisted the urge to blurt out 'I heard a lot about you too.' I wasn't sure how he would have taken it considering what I have heard about him. "Word gets around fast around here doesn't it?" I replied instead.

He nodded. "Nothing really happens except for work. So when something like you happens, it's a big deal."

"Yeah, that's what it feels like." An awkward pause stopped the conversation. I took the opportunity to bite into my roll. Jinnai fiddled

with his book, flipping through the pages he had left to go. "So what are you reading?" I asked between bites.

"*Metamorphosis*," he answered.

I almost choked on my bread. "Kafka? You're reading Kafka?"

He tilted his head. "Am I not supposed to?"

"That's not what I meant," I answered quickly. "I mean, I saw your library but I assumed the books were all written by rats, yanno what I mean? I, uh don't remember any versions of Kafka being printed that small."

Jinnai chuckled. "We have rats whose job it is to copy human books into formats we can utilize. Mostly it's research books but once in a while they find literature to work from. There's only so many books on molecular biology I can read."

Molecular Biology? Engineering? I don't even know humans who were interested in such subjects. "Well, I'd rather read Kafka than science books any day," I replied. "I never was good at science. So how do you like it?"

"Science?"

"The book."

Jinnai picked up the book. "I think it's really good. I find it amazing that the man's parents are more concerned about not being able to take advantage of their son rather than he's turned into a bug."

FREEZE FRAME

"I can certainly relate with the turning into part. I'm just glad I turned into a rat instead." I chuckled at the thought. "I don't think I would have made a good dung beetle." Jinnai smiled.

We paused again.

"So, can I ask your name?" I asked, more to be polite, as I already knew the answer. The dark rat became flustered once more. With the amount of time he must have spent alone as to be so awkward in my company made me wonder how he didn't turn into a sociopath.

"My full name is Eric-Jinnai," he answered somewhat unwilling. "I like to be called just Jinnai. It sounds better."

"My name is Anna. Anna Carmichael if you want to get formal. But Anna is good enough." I stuck out my hand for him to shake which he did.

"Hello, Anna. Pleasure to meet you."

"Hello, Just Jinnai."

We both laughed.



CHAPTER TWELVE

The Muse's Call

Lyrics © Sarah McLachlan from the album "Fumbling Towards Ecstasy"

Nancy was not amused as I relayed the night's events with her.

"I thought I told you to stay away from him," she whispered in an odd, low tone. Being we were the only ones in the room I doubted anyone could have heard us through the stone walls.

I sat on the bed facing her. "Yes you did but you didn't give me a good reason to," I replied. "I saw him and figured what the harm was. He looked nice enough."

Nancy sighed in frustration. "I didn't say he didn't look nice. I said you shouldn't be with him. There's no telling what he will do."

I couldn't comprehend her reaction to a simple late night talk. "What do you think he'll do? All he was doing was sitting there reading a book. I don't understand what your problem is. "

"He doesn't have to do anything for me to know he's no good." I heard my mother in her words. "Did you ask him about his father? That's all the information I need."

"No, I didn't ask about his father," I snapped back, getting annoyed by the bizarre third degree. "All I did was share some food and hold a very

basic conversation with him. As far as I could tell there's nothing wrong with him except he's lonely."

"It's only a matter of time." Nancy nodded her head with conviction. "You're too good natured for your own good."

"I think you're relying too much on gossip for your information." I jumped off the bed with annoyance. "Just because his father was an jerk doesn't mean his kid is going to be one. Judging from what I saw last night, that doesn't seem to be the case."

"Jenner killed Nicodemus. He was our beloved leader and he took him away from us." Nancy puffed out her chest in defiance to my criticism.

"Of course you have to hold it out on Jinnai," I replied with as much defiance. "Look, I just shared some bread with him, okay? Nothing happened."

Nancy's demeanor softened as she realized that we were fighting our first morning together. She walked over to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "You're new here. I just don't want to see you get hurt." I placed my hand on hers, giving a little smile.

"You don't need to worry about me," I replied. "I grew up in New York. It's my second nature to figure out who's okay and who isn't. Thanks for caring though. I really appreciate it." We embraced, reinforcing our friendship. Nancy pulled away but still held me by the shoulders.

FREEZE FRAME

"I don't know about you but I'm hungry. I don't have that much time to spend because I have to join up with Arthur soon. Want to grab a quick bite?"

I shook my head. "No thanks. I'm still running on the soup from last night. I figure I spend the day exploring on my own and gathering my thoughts."

Nancy nodded and we wished each other a good day. As she closed the door behind her, I let out a disgruntled sigh. Already I was beginning to get pushed into personal feuding and politicking. Living with the rats was going to be less idyllic than I had hoped.

The cool spring breeze swayed the sweet green grass, the area alive with the sounds of rats working hard and being grateful for it. I sat on a rock staring out over the rat's home, the sun feeling warm on my brown fur.

Eddie was entertaining himself jumping around barking and yapping, chasing giggling rat-children who delighted in his rambunctious company. At least he had found something to do.

I needed keep my mind busy, I just couldn't decide on exactly what. I could work in one of the gardens or in the kitchen but I was afraid boredom would set in quickly.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

The rats depended on this work for their survival, being more than happy to do their share. I on the other hand needed more than a menial job that literally only fed me.

I remembered what Jinnai said about rats transcribing books. That seemed intellectually stimulating, forcing me to concentrate on something other than my self-pity. Surely they would need help doing that. Pleased with my choice, I made my way back in.

I was beginning to walk the halls with the confidence of a resident, not worried about getting lost. As I made my way towards the library, sounds echoed up ahead. I was immediately intrigued. These were not the sounds of mundane work, instead resonating with a musical tone. As I neared the source, I realized it was indeed music, guitar music to be exact.

The lounge was on the community's second tier, the perfect place for relaxation, something I wasn't looking for at that moment. A solid bank of windows forming one wall flooded the room with natural light, decorative hanging lamps swaying unused. A small wooden platform with a folding screen for a backdrop was set up, surrounded by sofas, easy chairs and game tables.

On the stage a light gray rat playing a guitar sat on a stool, practicing as a brown rat in the front row listened on. He scribbled away on some papers, checking the timing and mistakes of the guitar notes with the playing rat doing the same on his own papers propped before him.

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While they worked on the music, other rats were working the room, pushing and pulling chairs to form a semicircle in front of the stage.

I slipped in, taking an unmoved sofa in the back. I had wondered what the rats did for entertainment, pleased to hear the first music since starting my trip into the valley.

I listened to the soft melody, memorizing the chords despite the numerous starts and stops. I didn't even realize started humming along until the music paused. Startled, I opened my eyes to find both the rat on stage and the one in the front row staring.

The rats moving the sofas continued their work uninterrupted.

"I'm flattered you're enjoying this considering it still needs a lot of tweaking," the guitar player said, not sounding insulted.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to distract you from your work," I replied, embarrassed.

"It's not work at all. We're just getting ready for a concert tomorrow night. You are going to be here aren't you?"

"Sure, I wouldn't miss it," I answered, never even knowing they held concerts. "It's been a while since I've been to one so this would certainly be a change of pace."

The rat in the front row looked over at me again. "You have such a lovely voice," he said. "Do you sing?"

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I chuckled at the question. "Only in the shower when no one else is around."

The two rats turned to each other, saying things I could not make out. They both nodded, the gesture making the guitar player stand, motioning me forward.

"Please, grace us with a song. Our regular vocalist has come down with a cold and can't perform. But if you can..."

I blushed even harder but still found myself walking towards the stage. "I'm far from good enough to entertain other people," I said, fidgeting. "I mean, that was something I did when I was little and that was only to family."

"Well, then pretend we're your family."

The stage had a small set of steps by its side. Each wood plank creaked as I went up, the sound making me even more nervous at what I was about to do. The brown rat placed his guitar down next to him, extending a paw in greeting.

"Hi there, my name is Alex," he said. Alex then pointed to the sitting rat in the front row. "That's Norman. He writes most of the music we perform."

"And I rewrite the rest that Alex does," Norman teased, laughing at his partner who made a funny face at him. I chuckled politely.

FREEZE FRAME

"Anna," I answered, shaking Alex's hand. The two rats gave excited smiles.

"Oh, so you're the new girl here," Alex replied. "It's an honor."

I blushed at the words. "Oh, I'm not that important," I answered.

Alex picked up his guitar, plucking out a few random notes. "You're here, that makes you important enough in my book. Now, about that song." He pulled out a couple more miscellaneous chords trying to entice me to sing.

"I'm not familiar with any of the music you were playing," I said in a faint attempt to talk myself out of singing.

"That's okay," Norman answered. "I'd like to hear you without Alex's noise getting in the way."

"Hey, you wrote that noise," Alex shot back from behind me. Their playful banter made me smile.

I felt jittery as I searched my brain for a song I knew all the words to. I could have made up something and the rats would not have known but it would not have sounded convincing. Whispering a couple of first lines, I chose a song and began to sing.

*The ice is thin come on dive in
underneath my lucid skin
the cold is lost, forgotten*

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

*Hours pass days pass time stands still
light gets dark and darkness fills
my secret heart forbidden...*

*I think you worried for me then
the subtle ways that I'd give in but I know
you liked the show
tied down to this bed of shame
you tried to move around the pain but oh
your soul is anchored*

*The only comfort is the moving of the river
You enter into me, a lie upon your lips
offer what you can, I'll take all that I can get
only a fool's here...*

*I don't like your tragic sighs
as if your god has passed you by well hey fool
that's your deception
your angels speak with jilted tongues
the serpent's tale has come undone you have no
strength to squander*

*The only comfort is the moving of the river
You enter into me, a lie upon your lips
offer what you can, I'll take all that I can get*

FREEZE FRAME

only a fool's here to stay

only a fool's here to stay

only a fool's here...

As my voice trailed, ending the song, I was surprised at how I was able to get through without stuttering or stopping. Every word came forth as if I had always sang them rather than just listening to them over and over on the radio. Even the rats moving furniture had stopped, listening from the back of the room.

Applause greeted the end of my little performance, not out of politeness but out of sincere enjoyment. Alex and Norman immediately pleaded for me to repeat it tomorrow night at their concert. I became apprehensive at the thought of singing in front of a real audience. At the same time I enjoyed the thought as well.

I told Norman I wanted him to back-up my set for that night and that I would try to show him how the music should go. I suddenly became too busy to think about wallowing. I now had a show to put on.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sins of the Father

Norman and Alex were two members of a creative team of three. A third rat named Beatrice served as their lead singer, belting out what sounded to be a combination of folk music and jazz.

They reminded me of the numerous garage band friends I had met over the years, but for obvious reasons, these rats weren't concerned about record deals and 'making it big'. Their sheer joy in performing was a lot different from the exhaustive work I was used to from those starting bands, all in the hopes of getting a record contract and getting paid lots of money.

Even I couldn't remember when was the last time I did something solely for the pleasure of it. If it was one thing I could envy the rats for, it was for that.

My assignment was to write down as many songs as I could. Norman would then help me write out the music for Alex. I needed a quiet place to concentrate but I didn't want to spend all my time underground. Even though the rats had built as many windows as they could, you could still spend a lot of time without seeing natural light. It made telling the passage of time disorienting.

I didn't want to embarrass myself with something vapid and Top 10ish just because I knew the words inside and out. How couldn't I? Radio Jockeys only played the singles twenty times an hour.

Since I had chosen a Sarah McLachlan song to audition with, I figured it would be best if I kept my collection to her music. What could go wrong with Sarah McLachlan? Okay, maybe a mass suicide but I would try to keep my choices to her more happy tunes, that is if I could tell the difference.

I was so intent on choosing songs I didn't realize I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. With a hard bump I crashed into someone, all my paper scattering to the floor.

"Rats!" I yelled out of now ironic habit.

"Oh, I'm really sorry about that!" The rat answered, bending over to help me gather up my pages. "I should have noticed you coming down the hall."

I recognized the voice at once. "Jinnai," I replied, suddenly flustered much to my amazement. "That's okay, they're all blank anyway." I grabbed at the paper, crumpling them as I did. Jinnai smiled, picking up the rest of the pages with a little more care than I was.

We both stood facing each other. I ran my hand through my hair impulsively. "So, what are you doing here?" I asked, not wanting him to walk away.

FREEZE FRAME

Jinnai hesitated with his answer but not out of not wanting to tell me. He didn't have many people asking him about anything outside whatever work he did. "Meeting. They're never ending. Sometimes I feel I'm in meetings more than I'm actually working."

"Don't let Justin hear you saying that," I answered, giggling. "He'll schedule another meeting to address that." I paused. "So, what is it exactly you do anyway?"

Jinnai shrugged his shoulders. "I keep an eye on supplies, food, things like that, make sure no one is taking more than they should be."

"You watch supplies? I thought you were a guard."

"I am," he replied with a little twinge of resentment. "I guard supplies."

"Oh."

I adjusted the papers into a semi-neat stack in my arms. Jinnai glanced around, scratching the back of his neck. "Well, if you're okay then I'd best be going. You look like you're heading somewhere anyway." He was about to take a step when I stopped him.

"No, I wasn't going anywhere specific if that's what you meant. I just wanted to go topside and find a quiet spot where I can write. Where are you going?"

There was a pause then the dark rat turned back to me. "Same place you were I guess," he answered. "Nowhere specific."

"So you're off duty?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to join me?"

I felt myself hold my breath as I waited for his answer. I couldn't believe I got nervous over such a simple question. Jinnai looked just as confused.

"Uh, I don't want to be a bother."

"I wouldn't have asked if it was."

The moment felt so awkward we just stood there in the hallway, waiting for one of us to move. "So," I started. "You know this place better than I do. Any suggestions for a nice quiet place where we can get some fresh air?"

Jinnai nodded quickly. "Sure... sure..." he stuttered as we both started walking. I barely remembered seeing Justin standing at the opposite end of the hall, watching our whole exchange with narrow, intense eyes.

We sat overlooking the artificial beach the rats had made for those unbearable summer days. The day was still warm with rat children taking advantage, splashing and playing in the inviting water.

I was lying on my stomach in the grass, writing as many lyrics as I could. Sunlight warmed my body but I was too busy concentrating and softly singing to enjoy it. Jinnai on the other hand was sitting under a

FREEZE FRAME

small brush, watching the playing rats below and looking at the valley beyond them. He obviously preferred to be in the shade however I questioned whether his intention was to avoid getting sunburned.

I turned my head, watching him for a little bit. His fur wasn't really black, as I had originally thought instead a very dark gray. Jinnai was about as tall as Justin except not as slim-built. I also wondered how much younger he was to the leader of the rats.

As he looked over to whatever he was he was looking at, I couldn't help but notice his bright eyes and the overwhelming sense of sadness that seemed to rain over him.

"So, what are you thinking?" I asked as I propped my head on my hand.

"Nothing," Jinnai replied as he looked over. His toes stretched and wiggled, grabbing at the new grass. I pat the area next to me with my hand.

"Why don't you come over here instead of hiding?"

"I'm not hiding," Jinnai answered, self-conscious. "I like being in the shade."

"You look like you're hiding to me," I answered as I sat up, stretching my arms over my head. "If you don't want to be here, you can leave if you want. I don't mind."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Jinnai's blue eyes widened visibly upset. "I didn't mean to make you think I don't want to be here," he answered almost pleadingly. "I don't mind being here. I just don't want to be..."

"Where anyone can see you?" I finished for him.

He became quiet. "I seem to make people nervous," he softly said. "I don't like the feeling of making others uncomfortable." He shrugged, letting out a small sigh. "So I just stay out of the way."

I felt sorry for him. "You don't make me nervous," I answered. "You don't have to hide from me."

I felt Jinnai get more uncomfortable causing me to gathered up my papers.

"Well, if you're not going to come out here, I'll just join you in the shade." I went over to the overhanging brush, taking a space next to him. Placing my papers on my knees, I began to write. I felt Jinnai fidget next to me.

"What are you doing anyway?" he asked, looking over at my paper.

I wrote down a last line, lowering the paper for him to see. "I'm writing down songs," I answered. "Alex and Norman need a singer for a concert tomorrow night. I'm doing this to help them out. Having something to do doesn't hurt either."

FREEZE FRAME

"That sounds neat," Jinnai answered. "Can I hear something? Just sing what you have written down."

My face began to heat up, the tips of my ears turning pink. "Why don't you just come to the concert? You can hear me all you want there."

Jinnai became playfully insistent. "Come on, give me a sneak preview."

I nodded my head. "Okay, but just the first couple of lines." I took another breath and started.

*Hey your glass is empty
it's a hell of a long way home
why don't you let me take you
it's no good to go alone
I never would have opened up
but you seemed so real to me
after all the bullshit I've heard
it's refreshing not to see
I don't have to pretend
she doesn't expect it from me
Don't tell me I haven't been good to you
don't tell me I have never been there for you
don't tell me why*

nothing is good enough

"You have a beautiful voice," Jinnai half-mumbled unsure if he should say it at all.

"I've been told," I replied, listening to the loud rushing in my ears. "So, are you coming to the concert tomorrow night?"

Jinnai lowered his head. "I'm sorry, I don't go to those things."

"Why not?"

"I just don't"

I closed my eyes, shaking my head. I can't imagine how long he had to endure being ostracized before convincing himself he didn't belong anywhere. I could hear in his voice he didn't want to believe it but no one would give him an outlet to prove otherwise.

"Jinnai, can I ask you a favor?" I gathered up the courage to finish my question.

"Sure."

"Tell me about your father."

His whole body started shaking so hard at my question I couldn't tell if he was angry or frightened by it. The dark rat jumped up, overwhelmed by what he should do, feeling as if he were about to snap. Instead he pointed at me, waving his finger.

FREEZE FRAME

"No one asks about my father!" he hissed. "There is nothing you need to know and I'm not going to let you use it for whatever you are going to do!"

"What do you think I'm going to do?" I yelled back both exasperated and confused. "I already have an idea what your father did. I'm still here aren't I? I wouldn't be asking if I wasn't interested in *your* side of the story!"

Jinnai clenched his fists, trying to control his embarrassed rage. "Who's to say you won't start ignoring me like everyone else once I do tell you?" Jinnai replied, stepping back. "Why should you be any different than any other rat here?"

"Because I am not a rat." I answered. "And I'm asking *you*. If I want to hear exaggerated rumors I'll ask any of the many rats willing to fill me in. I'm not interested in that though. I want to hear *your* story. I want to hear why a kind rat like you, one who looks like he couldn't hurt anyone even if he wanted to is willing to live a punishment belonging solely to his father. Why are you doing this to yourself?"

It was too much for Jinnai to bear. He spun away, running back underground. I followed a bit but kept my distance. I called out his name to no avail. He disappeared around a corner. I walked back to my pile of papers, kicking the sheets, sending them scattering.

I didn't know what angered me more. The way he reacted or the fact that the rats had put him through so much abuse. And they called his father cruel.

I spent the rest of the time in the quiet recesses of the library, writing down songs with a calm frenzy. Other rats came in and out with a couple attempting coming over to me. Something at the last moment however made them change their minds. I figured it was because I looked busy. I knew better. I radiated anger as I wrote, waiting to roar at anyone who dared come close enough.

A shadow passed before me, garnering not one upward glance. I continued to write as the chair scraped the floor, the brave figure sitting opposite me. Jinnai must have sat for five minutes before I allowed him to see any acknowledgement.

Slamming my pencil down, I straightened up, leaning back in my chair with a stern stare. I folded my arms tightly across my chest, unsure as to what exactly I was waiting for from him.

Jinnai twiddled his thumbs, tightening his lips as he glanced away. His anger was gone replaced now with shame. We sat like that for a few more moments, the time passing until the library emptied save for the librarian who sat at her desk at the reverse end of the room. She scribbled away in her notebook, unaware of us. Feeling secure in the near privacy, Jinnai started to speak.

FREEZE FRAME

"I was young when it all happened. My mother was the one who told me that my father, Jenner was dead. We didn't have time to mourn his loss though since we had to leave the rosebush soon after to make our journey to the Valley. I don't remember crying when it finally dawned on me that he would never return for us. It was just as well, since I never remembered him spending much time with us anyway. My mother cried a lot though. She still does."

My demeanor began to loosen up, my arms unfolding.

"I didn't start learning about what he did until later. I guess everyone felt I should be protected from the truth, being so young. He killed Nicodemus by creating an accident. He almost killed Justin to keep him from moving everyone to Thorn Valley. He almost killed Mrs. Brisby because she possessed the Stone. What child would want to hear their father was capable of such horrendous things?"

Jinnai stopped, swallowing hard as he reined in his emotions.

"That was the worst of it although he wasn't the greatest rat to be around in general. He was distant, quiet, always thinking but not thinking, you know what I mean? My mother says he wasn't always that way, just something happened up here."

Jinnai tapped the side of his head, his fingertip disappearing into the gray fur.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"He suffered from migraines that always seemed to start at a scar - it stretched from his temple to the back of his head. I don't know what happened, his fur always covered it enough to hide it anyway. All my mother says is that he wasn't always that way.

Jinnai traced his head where his father's scar would have been. He looked detached, not realizing he was doing it.

"Concern for my mental well being didn't last long when my fur color finally came in. I remind people too much of how my father looked. That doesn't sit well with many. They hated Jenner for what he did. As long as I looked like him, they hated me too."

Tears began to pool but I tried to keep them from falling. Jinnai saw my reaction, his own unease showing.

"My mother helped me through most of this." He looked around at the full shelves. "I must have read every book here at least three times. When I grew old enough to start working nobody wanted me around. My mother had to convince Justin to give me the guard post I have now. Even then it's a lonely job from late night to morning."

He drummed his fingers on the table. "I don't know what is it they want me to do. I can shave off all my fur and it still won't change the fact that Jenner is my father. No matter how helpful or polite I try to be they can't see beyond that. If it weren't for my mother I would have left here long ago. But where would I have gone? We're not typical rats. But what

FREEZE FRAME

I'm definitely not is my father." Jinnai stressed the last sentence as if he had to convince me that was true.

I wiped my eyes. "I know you're not your father," I answered. "Nobody is. But you can't live your life a recluse because other rats are holding your father against you. They have no right to do that."

Jinnai cringed in his seat. "I'm sorry for yelling at you before," he added. "When you asked that question I felt set up, like I was only there as a curiosity until you got your answers. He tapped his thumbs together. "No one other than my mother has ever asked me how I feel. The fact that you did... startled me."

"I'm not a typical rat either," I softly laughed.

"No, you're not," And he gave me a smile that made my heart skip.

I shuffled my papers, raising them to avoid his gaze. "So, you never answered my question before about the concert. Are you going tomorrow night?"

"I said I didn't go to those things."

"Okay, then let me rephrase it. Will you come to the concert with me?"

"It would be a privilege," Jinnai answered without hesitation.

I smiled shyly. I swore I heard his heart skip for a change.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ambush

My body felt burdensome as I shuffled back to Nancy's room, papers rustling in my hands. Practicing with Norman and Alex, although fun was quite tiring. My throat felt sore from all the singing and laughing. A nice hot tea from the cafeteria would hit the spot but a hot shower would be much better. I would have to thank Arthur personally for including that miracle in his designs for the place.

As I got to the door I could hear voices from inside of the room. Maybe someone just came over to visit Nancy, I figured as I turned the knob.

Justin rose cordially from the sofa as I came in. Nancy remained seated in her chair, waving her greeting instead.

"Hey there," I said, closing the door behind me. "So what's going on?"

Justin lowered himself back onto the cushion. "Oh, we were just talking," he replied. "I hear you've been nurturing a new talent you'll be sharing with us tomorrow night."

I tossed the papers on the end table. "I knew word gets around quick but damn, there goes the element of surprise."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"We're all excited about it," Nancy added. "We don't have that many performing artists among us so the more the merrier."

"Glad I'm filling a niche," I replied, stretching my back. "I didn't know I could sing either until I started doing it. It's fun."

Justin picked up some of my papers, casually flipping through them. "So are these the songs?" he asked. "Did you write them yourself?"

"They're some, " I answered. "We haven't decided which ones to use yet. I don't think we'll have a problem. And no, I didn't write them. They're just songs I remember the words to."

"That's great..."

A weird quiet passed through the room, making me at once suspicious. This wasn't a natural lull in conversation but the silent debate that occurs when someone wants to say something they shouldn't.

"I hear that you've been spending time with Jinnai." He started slow, gauging my reaction. His tone immediately put me on the defensive.

"Like I said, word gets around, huh?" I struggled to act as normal as possible, unfortunately not doing very well with it. "What about it? He said he was off duty. I didn't get him into trouble did I?"

Justin laughed at my concern. "No, you're not in trouble," he said, reassuring me. "I saw you two in the hallway after the security meeting. Jinnai was telling the truth."

FREEZE FRAME

The rat's attempt at playing a good-cop routine was irritating me. "Okay," I answered, making my way to the bedroom. "So if that's all..."

"We're concerned you're spending too much time with him," Nancy blurted to Justin's chagrin. He slipped her a nasty glance she ignored. "First the beach then the library..."

My annoyance was too much to hide. "Are you spying on me? I didn't do anything wrong if that's what you're wondering. And neither did he."

Justin stood up, waving his hands in front of him. "No, No! Of course we're not spying. Nancy didn't mean it like that. Other rats have just decided to tell me where you were today."

"Oh did they?" I asked, raising an eyebrow, my voice dripping with restrained ire. "Did they tell you that I was in the music room with Norman and Alex? Or that we went to visit Beatrice to cheer her up and play some of the songs for her?"

Justin and Nancy looked at each other sheepishly.

"How about when I went to visit Eddie again? Did they tell you that?"

"It's not what you think," he tried explaining.

"But I bet they told you every single moment I was with Jinnai down to the minute."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Justin cleared his throat. "We're just making sure nothing happens."

"What happens?" I snapped, my voice raising. "I have yet to have anyone tell me what exactly the problem is with Jinnai." I took a step closer. Justin's eyes narrowed at my bravado. "Maybe you can fill me in. What is it you're protecting me from?"

"We just don't want him to hurt you," Nancy blurted again. Justin abruptly raised a finger motioning her to stay silent. I rolled my eyes.

"All we're trying to say is that Jinnai has a reputation we want to make sure you know about."

I couldn't believe the nerve, considering he was one of the rats perpetuating this 'reputation' that as far as I was concerned was undeserved. I bit my tongue wanting so much to tell Justin and all his little rat friends to go screw themselves.

"Justin, Nancy, I really appreciate all that you are doing for me." A sigh came out like a low hiss. "I can't even begin to think how I can repay your generosity. I understand you are concerned for my well being especially where Jinnai is concerned, giving his upbringing..."

"So you understand what we're doing." Justin interrupted.

"I didn't say that," I replied. "Honestly, can either of you stand there and tell me when was the last time you've ever heard of Jinnai being violent? Even the slightest bit rude to anyone to justify this paranoia?"

FREEZE FRAME

"We're not paranoid," Nancy answered.

"You're not answering me either."

The silence spoke volumes.

I waved my hosts off. "Instead of being worried about what Jinnai might do because of the actions of his father, maybe you should concern yourselves with how you're treating him is affecting him now."

"What are you talking about?" Justin asked.

I snorted at the comment. "You don't talk to him, you don't try to get to know him, heck, you even give him a patrol that guarantees he comes in contact with the least amount of people possible." I leaned closer. "And because of what? Because his father did bad things? I got news for you. His father is dead. Stop punishing Jinnai because you can't punish Jenner!"

Justin flinched back, flabbergasted by my words. His face tightened, furrows wrinkling his forehead. The conversation didn't go where he wanted so he didn't want to argue any further. It was best since I didn't want to continue arguing either.

I lowered my head. "I'm sorry Justin," I mumbled. "But I don't think what you, Nancy and the others are doing is fair. It's bad enough humans treat each other like that. I'm just disappointed that despite everything the rats have accomplished, they still feel the need to create scapegoats."

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The air in the room became thick with tension. I wrung my hands, searching for any justification to get myself out of there. "If you'll excuse me, I'm really tired and I have a full day ahead tomorrow."

I rushed myself into the bedroom. I hugged the door, panting, listening to the rustling and muffled words on the other side.

There was some hushed talking between Justin and Nancy followed by the sound of the front door opening then closing. I could hear Nancy let out a loud sigh as she paced around the room a bit. I took off my clothes, grabbing a towel hanging on the wall. I needed that shower even more.

The creaking door was the only sound as I stepped back into the living room. I kept my focus on the floor in every attempt to avoid eye contact. I glanced up enough to see Nancy leaning against her desk, deep in thought. She looked back at me more embarrassed than angry.

"I've never seen anyone talk to Justin like that before," she said.

"Just because you're a good leader doesn't mean you don't make mistakes," I answered, not really wanting to get into a discussion. "He isn't perfect, just like Jinnai isn't violent or cruel or whatever you've confused him with. People should be judged by their own merits. Everyone deserves at least that."

FREEZE FRAME

Nancy folded her arms across her chest. I could only hope she was thinking long and hard about her own misperceptions. As I turned to enter the bathroom, she asked me one last question.

"Do you like him?"

I stopped, looking over my shoulder. "What?" I sputtered.

"Do you like him? You know, a lot. If you do then I won't talk bad about him out of respect."

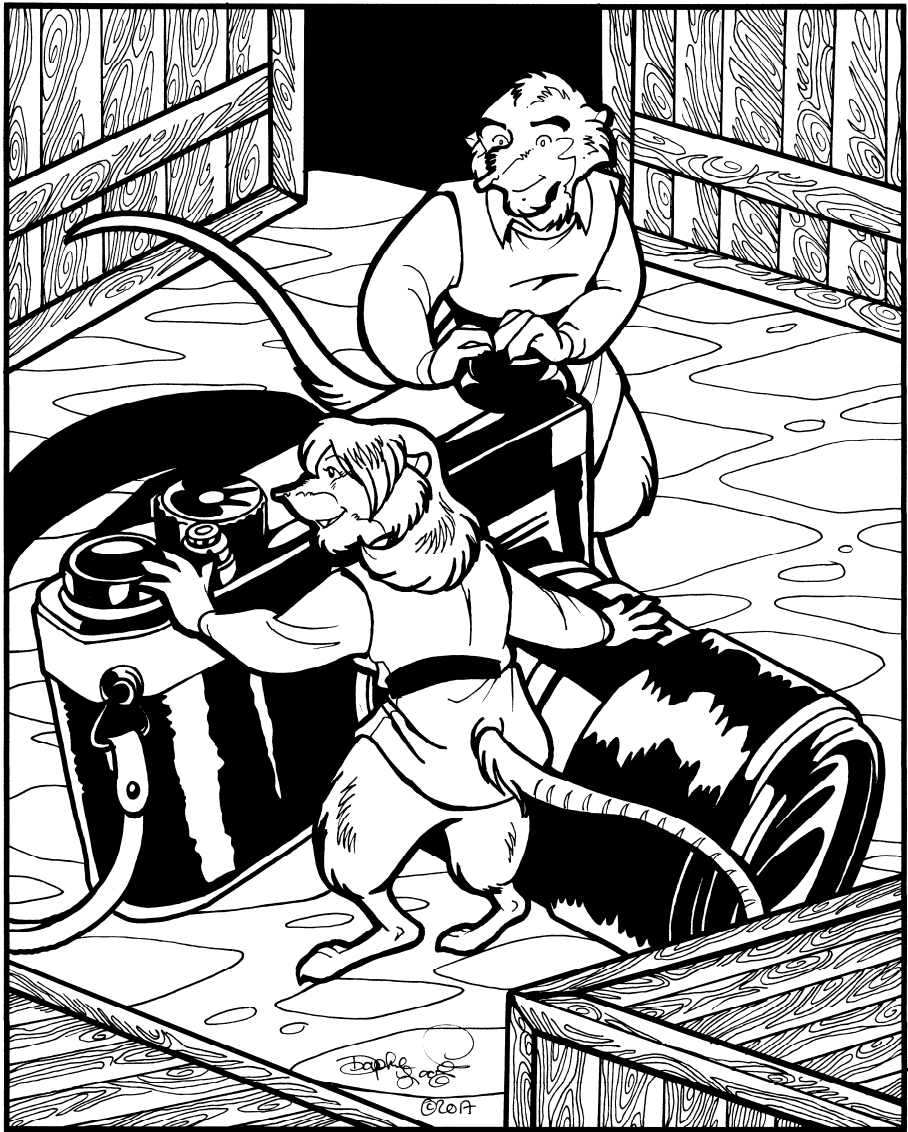
I shook my head, not believing where this train of thought had turned. "I don't think you should be talking bad about him anyway," I answered. "I like him sure, but not like him... you know... I only met him a couple of days go. I'm not in love with him if that's what you're asking." I shrugged, clutching the towel closer. "Now if you'll excuse me."

I couldn't have turned away fast enough. Jumping into the bathroom, I closed the door as quick as I did the bedroom door. My heart was pounding as the soothing hot water soaked my fur.

Like Jinnai? Of course I did. He's a nice guy. How couldn't I like him? But love him? A little premature for Nancy to go asking someone such a personal question like that isn't she? Love Jinnai, of course not. We're just friends.

...

Then why does it feel like I'm lying?



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Possession

Although the camera wasn't as heavy as I thought it would be it still required a bit of effort on my part. I had spent some time moving things out of the way, creating a path I was going to drag it through. I also made sure to be as neat as possible as I am sure the rats wouldn't appreciate a mess in their spotless storage room.

Satisfied I had made enough space without having to worry about causing damage, I grabbed the black, nylon strap and began to pull. The camera scraped against the floor but not enough for me to get it clear out of its corner. The strap dropped as I caught my breath. Maybe it would go faster if I pushed it.

Squeezing myself between the camera and the film containers lined up next to it, I wedged myself against the wall, propping my feet against the black textured plastic. With a heaving groan, I pushed as hard as I could, accomplishing the desired effect. The camera lurched into perfect position.

I was glad the rats didn't have a love for stairs. All levels were connected by a series of sloping ramps. That should make dragging the camera outside easy, or so I hoped. I was still out of breath though.

I pushed the case, turning the camera lengthwise then gathered up the strap. Bracing my heels against the floor I started pulling, walking slowly backwards as I did so.

"Hey, I thought I heard something going on here."

I turned my head as I continued pulling. Jinnai stood at the entranceway watching me strain. "Just getting... my camera..." I puffed, letting go of the strap.

Jinnai laughed. "You should have waited for me. I would have helped you." As the dark rat came up to me, I straightened out my wrinkled tunic, running my fingers through my hair.

"Actually, I was surprised I didn't see you before," I replied. "Aren't you supposed to still be on duty here? I've been moving stuff around for a while."

Jinnai let out a snort. "No one steals anything from the storage areas. Anyway it was Justin who called me away from my post."

I looked up at him with a mixture of surprise and anxiety. "Justin called you while you were working? What, another meeting?"

"I told you about those meetings," he replied, not sounding worried. In fact, he seemed a bit more cheery than usual. "Strangest thing too. He asked me if I would like a change of assignment. He never asked me that before. He would just say, 'go there' and I'd go."

FREEZE FRAME

"Yeah, that's really strange." I hid a knowing smile. "So what are you going to do?"

"Get the heck out of storage," Jinnai answered with excited confidence. "I'm going to get a real guard assignment. I've chosen a position working with Brutus in the main entranceway during the night hours."

"Brutus, eh?" The name caused me to unconsciously rub my forehead.

Jinnai could hardly contain himself. "He's a mute so it's not like I'll be doing much talking with him but at least I'll be in a place where I won't be bored out of my mind."

He was very proud of his unexpected promotion and I was proud also, not only for Jinnai but for Justin as well.

"That's absolutely wonderful." Without thinking, I reached out, wrapping my arms around his neck, giving a congratulatory hug. I didn't realize I had done it until my face was on his shoulder, my nose in his fur breathing in his scent.

Jinnai was taken off guard by my presumptuousness but I felt his hesitant hands touch my back, completing the embrace. We pulled away at the same time, our noses almost touching as we paused. I couldn't help but take in his beautiful blue eyes sparkling in the artificial light.

Feeling myself being swept by the moment, I quickly turned away, stepping back and giving out a nervous cough.

"Yes, I am very happy for you," I half-mumbled, trying to compose myself. Jinnai took a step back and looked away as well. I could only imagine what was going through his mind.

"Thank you," he answered with a small grin on his face.

For a split moment we just stood there wondering what to do next. I then remembered my camera. Thankful for the distraction I picked up the strap again. "I still gotta get this thing out of here."

Jinnai shook his head as I returned to my pulling. "Hold on," he started. "I have something that'll make the job a lot easier for you."

He walked back to the front of the room, rummaging behind some boxes. Finding what he was looking for he pulled out a wood tray with a rope tied at one end. As he came closer, I noticed that each corner of the tray had a wheel. He placed it down next to the camera.

"All right!" I cried at the sight of the dolly. "I was afraid I'd have to drag this thing all the way to the top."

"First we have to get the camera on it," Jinnai answered. "I hope it's not too heavy."

He went over to the opposite end of the camera, trying to get a grip on the casing. I did the same on my end. With a count to three, we lifted the camera, placing it on the wood pallet. I was glad I had someone to help

FREEZE FRAME

me since I knew even if I had found the wheeled tray, I would not have been able to set the camera on it.

"There we go," Jinnai answered, slapping his hands together. "Now, isn't that better?"

With the slightest pull the camera rolled on the smooth stone floor. I still had to exercise caution since the first bump would knock it right off the tray. "Thanks a lot," I replied. "Now to get this thing outside."

Jinnai was quick to invite himself. "Here, I'll come with you. It's still too big to roll around without help."

"Aren't you on duty though?" I asked. "I don't want to get you into trouble."

Jinnai shrugged. "I'm not going to get into trouble. Helping is part of the job description. I'm helping a rat in need."

I laughed as I started to pull the camera. "If you insist."

"You're twisting my arm," Jinnai replied in the most deadpan tone he could muster. Leaning against the camera he began to push.

I picked out the perfect place to set up long before I started messing around in the storage room. It was a flat grassy area by the beach near the little brush Jinnai had been hiding under just a day before.

The sun was still low in the sky but brightening everything with the newness of morning. The camera faced a large rock that made a good backdrop with its flat side. I also got some of the Valley scenery without

catching anything that would show the rats compound. The last thing I needed was Justin confiscating my film again, especially since it took a little more effort just to get the camera there, much less working.

I checked the new roll of film put in it prior to moving, making sure everything was ready. At this size, changing the film was a challenge to say the least.

Jinnai stood aside, watching me as I worked over the camera, adjusting the focus. Because of the awkward size, I couldn't turn the lens and look through the eyepiece at the same time. I had to turn, look and see if the transparent circles on the inside matched. If they didn't, I had to guess by how much I had to turn the focus ring by.

"That should do it," I said more to myself than to Jinnai who was listening.

"What are you doing anyway?" he asked.

I stepped back, studying over the stone backdrop. "I want to take a picture of myself. Even though I may never get to develop this film, I want a record of this. It's not every day someone gets to experience such a dramatic physical change."

"That makes sense," Jinnai answered. "But what if you never change back to the way you were before?"

FREEZE FRAME

I paused, taking in the idea. Actually, I didn't want to think I would never change back. In fact, the whole self-portrait idea was an anchor into the hope that I would change back eventually.

"Then I don't," I answered, somewhat straining at the words. "But I think after spending all that time dragging this thing here, I deserve a photo."

I looked through the eyepiece again, beckoning Jinnai to come over.

"I need you to help me with this," I said. I pointed to the shutter button on the top of the camera. "You see this? When I tell you I want you to press down on it. You probably will need to press a little hard but try not to shake the camera. There will be a loud click then you can let go. Okay?"

Jinnai nodded. "Sounds easy enough."

I combed my hair with my fingers, smoothing out my clothes again. I hoped I looked as decent as I thought I did. I felt a little nervous, downright goofy actually like the day all the kids in grade school went to get their picture taken.

I glanced over at Jinnai who just kept watching me, following my every move in case I decided to do something spectacular. In fact, I could swear he looked entertained by the whole thing.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

I sighed and stood in front of the rock, close to the edge so that the picture would have some greenery in it. I decided to just go with a simple pose, leaning against it with my hands folded in front of me. When I felt comfortable enough with my stance, I nodded my head.

"Okay," I said. "Push the button."

Jinnai placed both hands on the shutter button to press down. The loud click I told him would happen startled him a bit but the camera did not shake. The image was now forever collected.

As I relaxed my pose the sound of amazed gasping caught our attention. We looked over at the taller grass about a foot away, a whole group of rats watching us as they hid.

"Hey there!" I shouted, causing them to shuffle. "Come on out, there's no need to hide."

At first they were hesitant to come near the camera and us but just like human children, their fear evaporated as their curiosity grew stronger. One by one, child after rat child came out of their hiding place all smiles and giggles.

One of the older rats explained that they were swimming when they noticed us messing with the black and silver box.

"So what are you doing?"

"I'm taking pictures."

"What's that?"

FREEZE FRAME

I smiled at their enthusiasm. "I'm using my camera to collect images of people and things I want to remember."

The children gasped at the concept. "Can you take a picture of us?" The question caused them to burst into a chorus of 'yeahs!' and 'me too's'. Jinnai snickered as squealing rat children surrounded me.

"Okay! Okay!" I shouted. "If you want your picture taken, you all have to do is stand in front of the rock and wait until I tell you guys to smile."

The children scattered, shuffling themselves in front of the lens. I walked over to Jinnai, who was still grinning. "Now I wish I could develop this film," I replied. "But I guess it's the thought that counts."

With Jinnai manning the focus I was able to take several photos of the squealing kids. I laughed at the realization that it wouldn't have mattered if I didn't have any film in the camera. These little rats just liked performing for us.

The parents who wondered where their children had disappeared soon joined us. Needless to say, they ended up having their picture taken as well. As word spread as to that I was doing, we had to pull the camera back to accommodate the growing group. I lost count as to how many rats were showing up getting in on the act.

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Stronger than the urge to ham it up was the urge to eat. Lunchtime rolled around and everyone was eager to fill their stomachs. Soon it was just Jinnai and myself alone with the camera once again.

"I think it's time to pack it in," I said. "We better get this back inside." Then it hit me. "Wait a minute. All these rats and I don't have a picture of you."

Suddenly bashful, Jinnai turned away. "It's okay," he said. "We don't have to do this now. Maybe some other time."

"Get in front of the camera," I replied with a slight command tone. "We have this out already. Might as well use it."

"How about showing me what you're doing anyway?" he asked. "You keep looking in that window. I'm not even sure what you're looking at."

"Oh that's easy enough," I answered. "First of all, this isn't a window, this is called the viewfinder eyepiece. You look through here to see what you're taking a picture of."

We both leaned over to look through the eyepiece, our faces pressed against each other.

"You see that round transparent image? That's the split-image focusing system. When the two halves become one, that means the picture is in focus and the camera is ready."

FREEZE FRAME

The technical talk put me into teacher mode, causing me to ramble about every nuance I could think of. I was going on and on until I felt strands of my hair move in an odd way. I glanced up from the eyepiece seeing Jinnai smiling down at me. As he leaned against the camera, he gently rubbed a lock of my red hair between his fingers, taking care not to pull. I stood up, smiling sheepishly as he let the hair fall back into place.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I was boring you."

Jinnai laughed. "No, you weren't boring me. Not one bit. I heard every word you said."

I blushed even harder, wringing my hands. "Let's take your picture. Everything's set." I motioned for him to go to the rock. He walked over, trying to figure out the best pose to take. I leaned over the camera, reaching for the focus ring, making final adjustments. I watched him through the eyepiece just shuffling around. Jinnai looked up at the lens.

"So what do you want me to do?" he asked, swinging his arms aimlessly.

For some reason my hands were trembling. "I don't know," I answered without raising my head. "Be comfortable. Do what you think will make you look best."

Jinnai shrugged and leaned against the rock. "Is this okay?"

"It's fine."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

He gave me a small smile as I pressed down on the shutter release. Now Jinnai would forever belong to me. Regardless of what happened, he would always be mine.

FREEZE FRAME



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Showtime

Lyrics © Sarah McLachlan from the album "Fumbling Towards Ecstasy"

"I don't think I've ever seen you this nervous before. You're shaking like a leaf!"

Nancy fastened the last button on the white satin blouse as my hands were trembling too much to accomplish such a simple task. She went over to the bed to gather up my new clothes, a sky blue tunic with delicate dark blue embroidering.

After hearing about my performance the seamstresses took it upon themselves to create a new outfit for me for this occasion. The fabric was soft and fragile, more decorative than functional. It would not have survived five minutes under normal working conditions however it wasn't created for that purpose.

It was a more like a dress than a tunic but the cut wasn't right for one. I ran a brush through my hair as Nancy tied the loose ponytail with a blue ribbon. The ensemble was finished off with a dark blue sash around my waist that tied into an ample bow in the back.

Nancy stepped back pleased with herself. "You look wonderful, Anna. They have gone all out for you."

FREEZE FRAME

I looked down, attempting to see myself. As there was no mirror in the room I had to take her word for it. "They didn't need to do this but I really appreciate it. It's wonderful."

Then Nancy had to add to my near panic attack. "I hear the recreation room is near capacity," she said. "Everyone's showing up. I'm going to be there too, front row center."

I felt nauseous at the news.

"I can't believe I got talked into doing this," I muttered. "I should have just kept my yap shut."

"Don't be silly," Nancy cooed as she adjusted the tunic a little more. "You have a talent and there's nothing wrong with showing it off. I wish I could do something like that."

"Lucky me," I replied sarcastically.

A knock came on the door, making me jump. Nancy on the other hand was quite calm, after all, she wasn't the one performing tonight. As I stood in the bedroom compulsively adjusting, brushing and fidgeting, I heard the second voice from the door.

"Hi. Uhm, is Anna there?"

I could hear some hesitancy in Nancy's voice. "Oh, Jinnai. Hello. Surprised to see you here."

"Me too."

"Just come on in. She's in the other room. I'll get her."

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I listened to the footsteps and her head peeked in. She looked back behind her and slid back into the bedroom, a mischievous grin on her face. "Your date is here," she said deliberately.

"He's *not* my date," I growled. "I just invited him to the concert." I could tell she didn't believe it.

"I'm going to go ahead to the lounge so I'll leave you two alone. See you in a bit."

I buried my face in my hands, embarrassed beyond words.

He was sitting on the sofa looking rather uncomfortable as I walked out, trying to keep casual. Jinnai stood with a bewildered yet happily surprised look on his face. He took a breath, smiling. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," I answered shyly. "Well, I guess we better get going."

Jinnai nodded. "Yeah, let's go." The tone of his voice told me he would have rather stayed here with me instead.

Nancy wasn't kidding when she said the lounge was full. Everyone was seated in sofas and chairs, some even standing against the wall. Apparently the lounge wasn't designed to have everyone occupying its space at the same time.

Alex was already on stage, plucking a smattering of notes, tuning his guitar. Norman was on stage with him, setting up a stand with the sheet

FREEZE FRAME

music we worked so hard putting together. As I waited in the doorway, Jinnai went ahead, taking a seat right in front of the stage. The whole place was humming with talking and rustling.

"So, are you ready for your big debut?"

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Oh gosh, Justin. I didn't even realize you were behind me. I'm about to fall apart." I placed a hand on my chest as I caught my breath

Justin laughed. "Don't worry, we always have a cleaning crew on hand. You'll do fine."

I swallowed hard when the first notes of music started from Alex's guitar. He had seen me hiding in the doorway and was now going to force me into the light.

"Come on," Justin said as he held out his arm. "Your adoring public awaits."

We strode arm in arm down the narrow isle to the stage accompanied by polite applause. With a dramatic sweep, Justin helped me onto the stage and I stood before everyone. I scanned around but Jinnai immediately stole my gaze. Suddenly, I didn't feel as nervous.

Norman stood next to me and started to speak. "Because the lovely and talented Beatrice is held up with a horrible cold she could not join us tonight. So instead we have the equally lovely and talented Anna with compositions from her favorite songwriter."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

He gestured to me with open hands, the applause coming again. Alex had been playing a loop of the starting music and now it was time to get that song on the road.

*I love the time and in between
the calm inside me
in the space where I can breathe
I believe there is a
distance I have wandered
to touch upon the years of
reaching out and reaching in
holding out holding in
I believe
this is heaven to no one else but me
and I'll defend it as long as I can be
left here to linger in silence
if I choose to
would you try to understand
I know this love is passing time
passing through like liquid
I am drunk in my desire...
but I love the way you smile at me*

FREEZE FRAME

I love the way your hands reach out and hold me near...

I believe...

I believe

this is heaven to no one else but me

and I'll defend it as long as

I can be left here to linger in silence

if I choose to

would you try to understand

Oh the quiet child awaits the day when she can break free

the mold that clings like desperation

Mother can't you see I've got

to live my life the way I feel is right for me

might not be right for you but it's right for me...

I believe...

I believe

this is heaven to no one else but me

and I'll defend it as long as

I can be left here to linger in silence

if I choose to

would you try to understand it

I would like to linger here in silence

if I choose to

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

*would you understand it
would you try to understand...*

As the song trailed to its ending, I closed my eyes, listening to the final string of notes. I looked over at my favorite trio sitting in the front row, joining the audience in their quiet, reserved applause.

We did two more songs, one of them more as a joke to force a sing along. Everyone seemed to enjoy the audience participation. As I continued I found myself focusing a lot on Jinnai. His eyes never left me the whole time, even when I moved around the stage.

In my mind the audience began melting away as time passed leaving only Jinnai and myself. Encouraging the fantasy I sat down on the stage, dangling my legs over the edge.

*All the fear has left me now
I'm not frightened anymore
It's my heart that pounds beneath my flesh
it's my mouth that pushes out this breath
and if I shed a tear I won't cage it
I won't fear love
and if I feel a rage I won't deny it
I won't fear love
Companion to our demons*

FREEZE FRAME

*they will dance, and we will play
With chairs, candles, and cloth
making darkness in the day
It will be easy to look in or out
upstream or down without a thought
and if I shed a tear I won't cage it
I won't fear love
and if I feel a rage I won't deny it
I won't fear love
Peace in the struggle
to find peace
comfort on the way
to comfort
and if I shed a tear I won't cage it
I won't fear love
and if I feel a rage I won't deny it
I won't fear love
I won't fear love
I won't fear love...
I couldn't keep my eyes off of the dark rat as I sang those last lines.
I won't fear love...*

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

With one last song, this time standing, the concert ended a success. With the final round of applause I was shaking as hard afterwards as I did before. The after concert party was just as nerve-wracking. There was more thanks going around than I knew what to do with making me spend an extra hour just speaking to well-wishers.

It was during this occasion that delectable pastries made their way into the room. I couldn't get enough of the sweet things filled with raspberry jam.

It was also here where I tasted one of the rats' best kept secrets, a fermented concoction made of grapes and a combination of other berries. I giggled as the mild alcoholic beverage tingled my senses. Give it to the rats to figure out how to make wine.

Mellow from drink, I still felt exhausted. I found myself looking forward to spending a well-deserved quiet evening. Excusing myself from the party I met up with Norman and Alex, thanking them for doing such a wonderful job with the music. We had improvised as best we could and it was to everyone's credit that it all came together.

I pulled the blue bow out of my hair, setting the red strands free. As I ran my fingers through them, I started to make my way down the corridor back to the room where I was sure Nancy, if not Justin as well would be waiting to squeeze what little gossip they could. That second to last performance certainly would have everyone talking.

FREEZE FRAME

"That was really great." Jinnai stood in the dim corridor, waiting for me.

"Thanks," I replied, happy to see that he did come back. "I thought I wouldn't see you until tomorrow."

"I just wanted to walk my mother back to her room," he answered. "The parties, as rare as they are, tire her out quickly." He paused, giving a shy smile. "She really wants to meet you. She says she want to meet the one who figured out how to get me to come out in public without panicking."

"You don't look like the panicking sort," I added. "No one seemed to bother you either so that's good too."

Jinnai glanced away. "I never worried about anyone bothering me. In fact, I sometimes wished they would. At least they would be acknowledging my existence."

"That'll take time," I replied. "Rats are just like people and can be just as stubborn with their beliefs. They'll come around."

At first we headed to my room. "Maybe I should just hang low for a while," I muttered. Jinnai turned, not understanding.

"What do you mean by that? I thought you were tired."

"I am," I answered. "But if you haven't noticed already, Nancy is kind-of gossipy. I'm not looking forward to facing her. She can be relentless."

"Gossipy about what?" Jinnai asked, throwing the bait.

"Stuff." I wasn't ready to say anything yet.

"Not to be presumptuous," Jinnai started, "But I do have a room to myself. Why don't we just go there until Nancy falls asleep? Then you can go back."

My human side kicked in full force. "Is that a pick-up line?" I sarcastically snorted.

"What? No, I just thought..." Jinnai grimaced, a bit embarrassed.

I laughed, patting him on the arm. "I'm just kidding. It sounds fine."

By now I realized every private room in the community was built exactly the same. Small, cozy and neat, Jinnai's room was comfortingly silent. I immediately gravitated to his sofa, throwing myself onto the soft cushions.

"Make yourself comfortable," he joked after the fact.

I covered my eyes with my arm, partially falling asleep. "I can't understand why I'm so tired. All I did was stand on a stage and belt out a few tunes."

"Maybe you were just that nervous." The cushions shifted as Jinnai sat on the opposite end of the couch. I slightly tucked my toes under his warm thigh. "You did really well. I enjoyed myself."

I put down my arm. "Thank you. You're really sweet."

FREEZE FRAME

"I just need to ask though," Jinnai tapped his thumbs together. "Why did you sit down on the stage like that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just felt like it... singing to you. Why? Didn't you like it?"

A small laugh escaped him. "Yes, I really did. Thank you."

I yawned, stretching my arms. I didn't feel like leaving. "Do you mind if I slept on your couch for a little while? I am just beat."

"Of course," Jinnai answered. "Why don't you sleep in my bed and I'll take the couch. It's okay."

My mind went back to that first night in Justin's room.

"Oh no, " I said. "I am not going to put you out of your own bed. I already did that to Justin. The sofa is absolutely fine." I refused to budge.

Jinnai stood up. "Then the least I can do is get you a blanket." He walked off into the bedroom, rummaging through the closet. "I hope one is okay. I don't usually have extra blankets for guests."

"That's fine," I answered. I stretched out on the couch as Jinnai covered me with the blanket. "I promise I'll be out of here first chance I get."

Jinnai knelt down, leaning against the sofa so that he was eye level with me. "There's no need to rush. You are welcome to stay as long as you need to." He paused then began to speak again. "I just want to let you know that I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

I propped my head up. "You don't need to thank me. I didn't do anything I wouldn't have done anyway."

"But you did do something not a lot of rats here bothered to. You treated me like a member of this community, not like a bomb waiting to go off."

"I treated you like a human being," I said, knowing the full irony of the statement. "Like I said, it's nothing to thank me for. I would have done it for anybody."

"Would you?"

I let out a laugh at his self-doubt. "Okay, if you really want to know, you were just too cute to pass up." I couldn't help but giggle at his blushing.

"So why did you choose that particular song for me?" he asked.

I hesitated to answer. "If you want the truth it wasn't really for you. It was more for me."

Jinnai cocked his head, not understanding what I meant.

"Just take my word for it." I replied. "It's a little hard to explain."

He thought for a moment, pausing before asking his next question. "If you had to pick one song, which one would it be?"

I didn't hesitate to answer. In fact, I was hoping he would ask.

Listen as the wind blows from across the great divide

FREEZE FRAME

*voices trapped in yearning, memories trapped in time
the night is my companion, and solitude my guide
would I spend forever here and not be satisfied?
and I would be the one
to hold you down
kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
and after, I'd wipe away the tears
just close your eyes dear
Through this world I've stumbled
so many times betrayed
trying to find an honest word to find
the truth enslaved
oh you speak to me in riddles
and you speak to me in rhymes
my body aches to breathe your breath
your words keep me alive
And I would be the one
to hold you down
kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
and after, I'd wipe away the tears*

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

*just close your eyes dear
Into this night I wander
it's morning that I dread
another day of knowing of
the path I fear to tread
oh into the sea of waking dreams
I follow without pride
nothing stands between us here
and I won't be denied
and I would be the one
to hold you down
kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
and after, I'd wipe away the tears
just close your eyes...*

Jinnai lifted himself up, sitting on the edge of the sofa next to me. He placed his hand by my face, pressing the palm of his hand against my cheek, caressing my fur with his thumb.

I gasped, feeling as if I had stopped breathing. I felt the warmth from his hand as my eyelids half-closed. I looked away, savoring his touch. I could feel him lean closer, his breath warm against my muzzle. I

FREEZE FRAME

wanted so much to look at him, to look into his eyes but I fought it. I don't know why but I did... like I was afraid.

I won't fear love...

I felt his other hand reach under my chin. With a gentle finger, he pressed up, making me look up at him. Our eyes locked and for that moment, nothing else existing. There were no rats, no valley, and no world. Just us sitting together, enveloped by our own emotions, the only sound the pounding of our hearts in our chests.

I didn't want this to happen. All the reason in the world told me this couldn't happen. Yet reason did not exist any longer.

With a small, hesitant movement, Jinnai leaned forward, softly placing his lips on mine.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Decision

As I lay on the sofa, I found myself unable to get any rest whatsoever. My fur was damp from sweat, the fine embroidered tunic I was still wearing now wrinkled and stained with moisture.

I listened to the sound the blanket made as I pushed it aside onto the floor, undoing the sash around my waist. Pulling the tunic over my head I tossed it along with the blanket. The blouse underneath was shown no more respect.

As I stood there clothing crumpled at my feet, a strange serenity overtook me. Even in the darkness I could still make out the faint contour of the closed bedroom door. Making no noise walking over, I turned the knob without knocking. The door gave out a faint creak as I opened it just enough to slip inside.

I stood by the opening silently watching the silhouette of the sleeping figure, the dark blue nightglow just making out an outline in the bed. The figure rustled, turning over to face me, his eyes half opening. Jinnai, groggy from deep slumber stared at me.

"Oh, uh, I knew the sofa was uncomfortable," he mumbled as he tried to wake himself up.

"Yes it is," I spoke under my breath. "I couldn't sleep."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Jinnai began to sit up, gathering his blanket. Rubbing his eyes, he placed a foot on the floor. "I'll go to the sofa then," he replied. "You can sleep here."

I stepped in front of the door, grasping the knob from behind.

"I didn't say anything about you on the sofa," I whispered back as the door creaked again and clicked as it closed.

FREEZE FRAME



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Awakenings

I felt my eyes flutter with the beginning morning. Tuning onto my back I placed my arm across my forehead, taking in a deep breath. Sunlight crept through the small bedroom window though not enough to wake me completely. It was still early with was no rush to start the day.

As I faded in and out of consciousness I listened to the sound of breathing next to me. I reached out finding warm fur to slip my eager fingers through. Wiggling over I embraced the sleeping rat, relishing the scent of his dark gray fur.

With an indistinct moan Jinnai took my hand. Wrapping his arms around me we slept in each other's arms.

I snuggled against him, my head buried in his chest. His arms tightened as if he couldn't hold me close enough. As he started to caress my hair, I looked up at his half-opened eyes. I nuzzled Jinnai's throat.

"So don't you think this is more comfortable than the sofa?" I asked. Jinnai chuckled, kissing me on my forehead.

"Most definitely," he whispered as his caress lowered to my back. His touch was very soft with a teasing, hesitant pace about it.

"What?" I looked up at him again. He returned my gaze with a smile.

FREEZE FRAME

"Nothing," he replied. "I just can't believe you're here. I'm almost afraid to wake up."

I giggled at his words. "I'm very real," I replied. I propped myself up, causing him to roll onto his back. He placed a hand on my cheek, convincing himself this was indeed happening.

It was rather strange. I didn't feel odd about this at all. In fact, it was the first time since I changed that I truly felt like I belonged. If I never turned into a human again, it would be no great loss.

As I gazed into his blue eyes I began to feel the yearning deep within me that had brought me into the room the night before. I stroked his face, concentrating on his features. How anyone could mistreat such a beautiful creature was foreign to me. I couldn't imagine being with anyone else like I was with Jinnai, human or otherwise.

As if an unknown force was pulling me, I leaned over, tenderly kissing him.

What started as a comforting embrace began to turn into something more passionate. Gentle touches turned into needing hands, pulling at each other with growing desire. Our breathing became heavier, the kissing deeper, then with strong hands Jinnai pulled me on top of him.

As our lips parted, it was obvious in both our faces that this was what we wanted; this was what we needed.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"It's too good to be true," Jinnai whispered in my ear as he embraced me tightly.

"Then all the more reason to cherish this moment," I answered, raising my head. I placed a finger against his lips, silencing him from speaking any further. I nuzzled his ear, giving it a little lick. "Don't think," I whispered softly. "Just do."

With that, we rolled over, Jinnai looking over me. I couldn't tell whether he reached for me or I reached for him first. In the end it really didn't matter.

As we kissed again, the first rays of sunlight began to pour into the room.

FREEZE FRAME



CHAPTER NINETEEN

One of Us

The incessant pounding on the front door grew desperate as it startled us from our half-slumber. The noise stopped for few seconds then the hard knocking started all over again.

Although none of the doors in the community had locks, no one dared to barge into private quarters. I thanked goodness I could count on that considering what Jinnai and myself were doing for most of the night and had finished moments before. I certainly didn't need anyone walking in on us.

As the knocking picked up tempo Jinnai let out a frustrated sigh, tossing the blanket off of him.

"I'll get it," he groaned as he forced himself up out of the bed. "I don't want to start the day explaining what you're doing here if you answer the door."

I rolled onto my stomach, propping my head on my hands. "Well, not yet anyway," I replied. "I'm sure word will get around soon enough once Nancy notices I never returned to her room."

FREEZE FRAME

Jinnai laughed. "In that case everyone knows by now." He grabbed his shirt, tossing it over his head, still trying to shake off his groggy demeanor.

"I can think of worse stories to go around," I shouted as I buried myself under the blanket, sneaking a few more moments of rest.

A male voice I didn't recognize spoke from the main room but I couldn't clearly hear what he was saying. Instead I drifted off, feeling relaxed, content and dare I say, actually happy. It was something I hadn't felt in such a long while and I intended to savor as much of it as I could.

And as all things good, it wasn't meant to last.

The door closed with a firm click with Jinnai, looking quite annoyed, returning to the bedroom.

"What happened?" I asked as he went into the closet to grab a fresh set of clothing.

"You might as well get up too," he started. "Justin's called a security meeting. I have to go now."

I popped up from the bed. "A security meeting this early? What happened? Did he say?"

Jinnai continued dressing. "No one knows yet. Not even the guard that came here."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

I watched how he moved to see if I could pick up any clues as to what was going on. Although Jinnai was stern faced, it was more over being interrupted in general.

I slid out of bed, heading into the living room where I had left my clothing the night before. Inspecting the pile, I frowned at the wrinkles making the suit unsuitable for public wearing. Flinging the clothes onto the sofa, I shuffled back into the bedroom.

"Do you have an extra shirt or something?" I asked as Jinnai strapped on his belt. "I didn't bring any extra clothes."

"Of course you can't go running around naked," Jinnai answered. As he was about to hand over the shirt, he paused. Stepping back he looked me over, dangling the shirt just out of my reach. "I really do prefer you like that."

"Smartass," I snorted as I made a playful jump for the shirt, grabbing it from him. "I'm covered in fur. How can I be naked?"

A sultry grin crossed his face. "If I didn't have this meeting, I'd remind you what exactly that fur hides."

A disbelieving look crossed my face as my head poked out of the collar. "Now I've seen a new side of you. Thinking about sex when you should be working."

"Well, it's what I'd rather be doing," he answered, shrugging as he hid a crooked smile.

FREEZE FRAME

I laughed again this time with embarrassed shyness as I held in my agreement.

We made our way out together, coming across others on the way to the meeting room. For the first time my presence was treated no different from any one else's. There were no unusual greetings or out of place stares. I was being ignored and I felt relieved comfort in it.

Reaching the doorway to the meeting-hall, Jinnai turning to me. "So I'll see you later then. I don't know how long this is going to take so you shouldn't wait up."

"Sure," I answered. "I'll just come looking for you." With that, he startled me with a quick peck on the lips. I grinned and kissed him back, still getting used to the fact I now had a rat boyfriend. Some of the seasoned guards gave a side-glance at the display.

As I watched him disappear into the room, I caught a glimpse of Justin inside seriously looking through paperwork. Feeling intrusive, I decided it was time to go find something productive to do.

I stepped back only to come to an abrupt stop, feeling a presence behind me. My eyes met a dark tunic as I turned. Raising my head, I looked up at the towering rat, my gaze meeting narrow, yellow eyes.

He was taller than all the guards passing us in the hall and just as intimidating. He leaned over until we were face to face, growling as he took in my smell. I was frozen in place, wondering what he was doing.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

His nostrils twitched as he took in another breath. With a nod he gave a toothy smile, the pale shards making me shudder. Letting out what sounded like a chuckle he raised a clawed finger to my face. I followed the finger as he pointed, resting the sharp point right at the center of my forehead.

"Brutus!" I whispered as the gesture clicked with my memory.

He pushed in his nail just enough for me to feel it following with a strange gurgly laugh.

"Brutus, the meeting is about to begin," a familiar voice announced, breaking the weird moment. "Oh, hi Anna," Justin added, not finding his guard with his finger in my forehead strange at all. I waved back without looking at him.

Brutus nodded at his leader. He placed his hand on my head, ending our awkward re-acquaintance with a heavy pat.

Rubbing my forehead I was at last alone. Muffled voices started the meeting behind the now closed door. I knew I couldn't stand. My stomach gave a small, nauseous rumble, clueing that next logical step was to head on to the cafeteria.

While I was eating it was inevitable Nancy would catch up to me.

"There you are!" she squealed over the noise. Without even waiting for a response, she sat herself down opposite me. "You can't believe how worried I was when you didn't come back last night."

FREEZE FRAME

"Worried about what?" I asked, acting as normal as possible. "This place isn't teeming with crime or anything like that."

Nancy waved her hand. "I know but I was still expecting you to come back. Where were you anyway?"

"Around." I took a sip of some berry tea.

"Around?" Nancy was dubious. "That's not a specific answer."

I debated whether to tell her what she wanted to hear. Her mannerisms already signaled she had an idea as to my whereabouts the night before.

"How specific do you want me to get?"

Nancy looked over her shoulder, narrowing her eyes at me. With a sly smile she leaned over as close as she could.

"For starters you can tell me what you're doing wearing a shirt with Jinnai's scent all over it. I can smell it from across the table."

I gave a chuckle, not doing a good job refuting her veiled accusation.

"Well?"

"Well, he was nice enough to let me borrow it," I answered, hoping that would suffice. Of course, it didn't.

"Is that where you were? In his room?"

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"I slept on the sofa," I protested. "I was tired. My clothes got wrinkled and I borrowed a shirt." My intense blushing betrayed what little privacy I was trying to keep.

Nancy replied with a mischievous laugh. "You really are one of us now, aren't you."

I thought about her response. I would have given anything to become human again, returning to civilization with all its problems as well as conveniences. Ever since last night however, I didn't think once about it. In fact I found I didn't even care. I was a rat now. That was all that mattered. My human life was over and I didn't miss it one bit.

A warm smile crossed my muzzle, my whole body relaxing with the realization of her words.

"Yes, I am," I replied, my voice a whisper. "I am one of you."

FREEZE FRAME



CHAPTER TWENTY

The Calm Before the Storm

I spent the day in the library, sorting, stacking, and recording new arrivals and returned books. It was fascinating how scrap paper was turned into bound volumes complete with illustrated pages and handwritten text. The vast collection encompassed many different subjects and genres, from schoolbooks to children's picture books.

One title made me smile as I flipped through its familiar pages, tracing the cover icon with my finger.

'Metamorphosis' by Franz Kafka.

"Anna?"

I glanced up from the stack I was putting away. Rena the librarian waved her hand to get my attention. Climbing down the stepladder I leaped to where she was, ready to be of any help.

"I've gotten word from the print shop," she started, handing over a slip of paper. "They have several new volumes ready for circulation." She pointed to a wood bookrack with wheels. "Take that and go pick them up will you?"

I nodded in affirmation.

FREEZE FRAME

The print shop was on the lower level known as the Manufacturing Wing. The entire floor was dedicated to the production of materials for the community from cloth to metalworks.

As I passed each room I couldn't help linger a bit at each, taking a peek at what was being done. I reminded myself I couldn't stay too long as Rena was looking forward to the new acquisitions.

The print shop was a much larger than imagined. Desk after desk of writing rats lined the room, facing giant pages of source material pegged to the wall. The back of the room was dedicated to sewing the pages together, binding them into leather bound covers. Although the door was already open the squeaking cart brought everyone to my attention.

"Ah, you're finally here," A light brown rat answered. "Come in... Anna? Is that your name?"

"Yes, it is."

"A pleasure to meet you." He took my hand. "I am Nathan. Welcome to the print shop."

As he led me to the side room where the finished books were stored, I cursed the cart embarrassed by the noise that shattered the quiet of the chamber. I looked back into the main room watching the rats working diligently at their script, unaffected by the noise.

"I'm surprised you don't have a printing press," I commented as Nathan packed the books. "I'm sure it would make your job a lot easier."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Nathan gave a knowing grin. "Research and Development has been promising us one for a while. They're still having trouble getting one to work without constantly breaking down."

"Really? I thought you guys could build anything after seeing this whole place."

He smiled at my innocent comment. "We may be smart, but we're not miracle workers." Nathan grabbed another stack of books from the shelf. "We'll eventually have a press but until then, we're stuck doing this the old-fashioned way."

He continued to carefully place books on the cart, their leather covers getting the best of my curiosity.

"Not to be morbid but what are these covers made out of? I notice they're leather but I don't remember seeing any rat-sized cows around."

The brown rat let out a chuckle at the thought of tiny bovines. "Now that would be a trick," he answered. "You have to remember that most of our supplies are freely given by the Valley itself. If we come across anything that isn't too far gone, we'll utilize as much as we can. We try hard not to waste anything."

"The ultimate recyclable," I joked. "And here I thought you cannibalize the dead."

Nathan gave me a horrified look despite the joking tone in my voice, although to be honest, the thought did cross my mind.

FREEZE FRAME

"Sorry," I apologized. "Bad joke."

The rat sighed in relief. If only he knew.

"That's the last of it," he announced as the final book was placed on the cart. "Give Rena my regards. We'll have a new batch for her by the end of the month."

"Will do," I answered, giving my polite good-byes to the scribes as I left.

There were twenty hand-bound books on the cart, soon to be well worn by voracious rats who couldn't get enough knowledge. Some of the titles were challenges in and of itself, 'Comparative Vertebrate Anatomy', 'Physics and its Applications', 'Ethics in Genome Manipulation'. My brain hurt just reading them.

I was lucky to get through basic math courses in high school and avoided such classes all together in college. I wondered what the rats got out of such heavy reading. I'm sure there were some who needed to know these things but all of them?

If I was going to be a permanent part of this community I have to convince Nathan to get a hold of some other types of novels for my sanity. No way could I find science textbooks entertaining.

I made my way back at an easy pace. The halls were quiet although there was a faint humming of work echoing throughout.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

As I neared the top of the ramp I recognized the set of doors lining my way. It was the hallway to the infirmary where that little yellow mouse worked. The humming grew louder but didn't catch my attention until I turned the corner.

A group was fussing around the infirmary door. A female nurse stood guard, keeping them at bay. I didn't want to eavesdrop yet I wondered what happened.

"Excuse me please."

A rat I recognized from the meeting politely yet firmly passed through the crowd. I slowed to a stop, watching the nurse open the door wide enough to let him in while continuing her vigil against the prying bystanders. As the guard disappeared I caught the familiar sight of a dark gray rat with a red tunic inside. My heart skipped.

"Jinnai?" I blurted.

Pushing the book cart aside, I wove my way through the crowd.

"Excuse me..."

"I'm sorry, but no one is allowed except authorized personnel."

I was surprised by the sudden exclusive nature of the room.

"Could you tell me if Jinnai is in there? Did something happen?" I felt nervous at the thought that something may have happened to him and on his first day of real guard duty no less.

FREEZE FRAME

"I'm sorry but I can't answer you," the nurse replied in a stern, practiced tone.

"Could you at least tell me if that's Jinnai in there? You don't have to give me details. I just want to know..."

The nurse shook her head about to say her rehearsed comment again when I heard my name from the other side.

"Anna?"

"Jinnai?" I answered back with a nervous crack.

The nurse looked over her shoulder.

"It's okay," I heard him say to her. "You can let her in."

With reluctance she opened the door. I rushed past her not liking what I encountered.

Jinnai looked as if he had been in a battle zone. His tunic was torn and dirty with his fur all disheveled. Still, he looked fine compared to the rat sitting on a cot nearby.

His right arm had been torn open from wrist to elbow. Mr. Ages was sewing up the nasty wound, with every tug of the thread making the rat hiss in pain. Pooling where they sat ran a speckled trail of blood leading from the door. Two guards stood by alongside the nurse assisting Mr. Ages. One of them was the guard who had entered moments before.

"Oh my God..." I gasped, trying hard not to stare. "What happened? What happened to you?"

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Jinnai took my hands, reassuring me. "I'm okay, I only look bad. Justin had sent out a group on what was supposed to be a 'look and see' mission. It didn't quite end up that way."

I was just about to ask my next question when the door opened again. Justin came in, scanning the room. Seeing me made his face grow long.

"I don't think she should be here." Justin did not making eye contact with me.

"She might as well stay," Jinnai answered. "This has just as much to do with her as it does us."

The back of my neck tingled at the sound of those words. There was only one thing that could connect me to whatever disaster fell this group.

Justin counted heads, not liking what he saw. "Where's everyone else?" he asked with rising concern. "Seven of you were sent out. I only count three."

Jinnai glanced over at me. "Yes, there were seven of us."

I didn't like the way he stressed 'were'.

"The others have been captured."

"Captured?" Justin spurted. "Are they...?"

FREEZE FRAME

"They're still alive, that I know for sure," Jinnai answered. "Our attempts to rescue them were ineffective." His eyes followed the crimson trail staining the floor.

My head began to spin at the vague words. "Who captured them?" I asked, needing to hear the answer I feared.

Jinnai and Justin fell silent with both sets of eyes on me. With a great deal of hesitation, Justin answered.

"Your poachers," he said. "They've returned."



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Reality Check

Camping equipment collapsed in dangerous heaps all around me as I dug through the hidden stash for my black camera bag. My gear had been spirited away into a nearby cave as to not attract attention to the compound.

Eddie watched through the opening as I pulled at the now larger than life backpack, catching a view of what I was looking for. I clawed my way through the denim and noisy polyester, grabbing the strap attached to my prize.

The camera bag was lodged between the backpack and the stone wall, too heavy for me to push or pull out of the way. That's where Eddie came in. I yanked the wide strap through the crevice attempting to get it as close to the opening of the cave as possible.

"Eddie," I yelled. "Can you still see me here?"

"Yes," the Border collie replied. "I can see the strap too."

"Good, because I want you to grab it and pull."

The dog took care squeezing his head into the hole, making sure he didn't bite into me instead. I placed the strap between his teeth. With a pat as a signal he bit down.

"Got it?"

Eddie replied with a low growl and an assured nod.

I grabbed a hold of his collar and climbed on his neck. The dog heaved with a firm tug.

At first the bag did not want to move, preferring to stay stuck. A couple of more determined pulls freed the black case, allowing us to exit the cavern.

Eddie opened his mouth, dropping the bag. Without looking at the dog I scurried off towards the dangling zipper, hooking my hand into the ring. As the zipper opened, a sturdy push tipped the bag onto its side. The flap opened and the item I was desperately searching for tilted out of its lined case.

Justin, Brutus and Jinnai braced themselves against the heavy, wide-lens attachment to get it out of the case. I was busy unhooking the regular lens already attached to my camera. The latch released and the lens popped off the metal frame.

I waved the three rats into position. As they held the contraption in place I fitted the joints into the lens frame. With a simple push and twist, I heard the tell-tale snap. The lens was securely fastened.

"Okay, Eddie. I need you to lift it again." I held up the neck strap for the dog to grab.

FREEZE FRAME

Justin brushed himself off as he watched me shorten the strap to avoid having the camera drag on the ground.

"I can't believe how heavy that one part is," he replied. "When we first found your camera, it wasn't nearly as heavy as it must be now."

"That's why I needed Eddie to help us," I answered still adjusting the strap. "This lens is for long distance. I was hoping that maybe I would get some good pics of a bear or something. That way I could use this thing instead of risking getting to close."

Jinnai turned to the direction of the still distant yet still too close for comfort camp. "They may not be bears but they're still just as dangerous."

"Except those don't need provoking," Justin added.

With the strap short enough, I gave Eddie the signal to lift the camera. Although it was well off the ground, the camera still dangled too close for my liking. One good whack on a stone would shatter the lens. I cursed myself for not packing the lens-cap thinking I wouldn't need it since I had the storage bag.

"I can't get the strap shorter than it already is," I told the Border Collie. "I need you to be as careful as possible with it. Try not to bang into anything, okay?"

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Eddie let out a short whuff, sending the camera bobbing precariously. I tightened my fists. There was no way that camera was going to survive the trip back to the main compound.

"Wait, maybe Brutus can help."

The hulking dark rat was gesturing to Justin in a fashion reminiscent of sign language. Justin nodded patting him on the shoulder then turned to me.

"Brutus is the only one here who's strong enough to hold that camera. If he can get on Eddie's back, he can pull the strap higher and keep the camera off the ground."

I was somewhat apprehensive remembering Eddie and Brutus' first encounter. The dog didn't seem to share my concern and neither did Brutus.

Understanding what was needed, Eddie lowered his head, the lens giving a slight tap as it lowered to the ground. Brutus jumped over, giving the dog a firm pat on the muzzle.

With a fistful of white fur, he hoisted himself onto the dog's broad neck, digging his claws into the nylon. Leaning over he grabbed the strap. The camera began a slow climb until it rested on the dog's neck.

Felling comfortable enough, Eddie rose to his feet. The camera still dangled but was well off the ground. The trek would remain slow going

FREEZE FRAME

however. Eddie had to watch his step regardless as to not send Brutus and the camera tumbling.

The three of us followed beside the dog, careful to not end up underfoot. The walk was quiet as no one had anything to say. Instead we all took the moment to gather our thoughts and plans. My mind was racing with scenarios.

I reminded myself that these were poachers, ruthless men who had neither rhyme nor reason to their plans. They would trap their own family members if they could make a buck off of their hides.

I shuddered as I thought back to that day, the day I thought was going to be my last.

The Stone had saved my life but those poor rangers were not so fortunate. I wondered what had happened to them. My chest felt tight with stress. I was beginning to suffer from tunnel vision until I felt a gentle hand on my arm.

The touch surprised me, Jinnai smiling at my reaction. I couldn't help but return his smile, letting out a nervous sigh. His fingers wrapped around my hand, squeezing tightly then relaxing.

I leaned in closer as we walked, giving his hand a squeeze as well. My mind still raced but now there was a comfort to keep me from going totally insane with thought.

Behind us I heard Justin chuckle at the sight before him.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

Right above the entrance there was a natural ledge, giving me the idea to rest the camera on it. Eddie and Brutus lowered the heavy thing onto the stone surface, much to the dark rat's obvious relief. Even though he was strong, he gave a lot of himself and was glad to have it over with. With the camera in position the next phase of our plan went into effect.

Ever since the rats moved to Thorn Valley, it was understood there was the risk that rangers would enter the Valley sooner or later. It was the closest to no people they could get. At the same time they started building their little community they also worked on defenses as well, the most effective being simple camouflage.

I remembered the first time I saw their technique at work. Every entrance and window was covered with a net of leaves, twigs and moss. From a distance, you couldn't even tell that there was something not quite right with the landscape. Since the rangers' main concern was illegal campers, noticing there were plants lined up a little too orderly wasn't high on their priority list.

A couple of rats carrying what looked like a rolled-up carpet came towards us. Twigs and leaves crackled with every movement, everyone being careful not to unroll the net too fast or the camouflage would break and fall off. The distinct odor of moist grass from the square of foliage filled the air. With a synchronized movement they tossed the net over the camera.

FREEZE FRAME

"When I first came into the Valley, why didn't you guys cover everything up?" I asked as I watched the effort before me. "When I found this place everything was left the way it was as if I was never here."

Justin pulled the netting to even out the sides. He paused for a moment.

"That's a really good question," Justin replied, trying to remember what was going through his mind at the time. "I don't know. All I remember was hearing about you being in the Valley but there wasn't that sense of urgency that usually accompanies news of humans around."

He stopped, realizing the moment did come off as completely odd. Snorting, Justin smirked as he searched his memory. "That's really weird. That was the first time I didn't call for the usual protective measures against discovery. It was as if it didn't matter if you found us."

Even I had to chuckle at this. The one human they didn't hide themselves from later turns into a rat and joins their little community. I began to wonder if the Stone, this magic, was a lot more involved than I had given it credit for. My only fear was what the Stone still had in store.

Although the camera was well covered, the sunlight reflecting off the wide lens worried me. From this distance the poachers would be able to notice the shine and may encourage them to investigate. I leapt onto the ledge to adjust the net, sticking out leaves to help shade the glass. Hopefully they didn't notice what reflection did make it through.

Now it was time to get to work. "Justin, Jinnai, I need you guys to come up here and help me with this. You see those rings around the lens cylinder? I'm going to need you to turn them until I say the focus is okay."

Justin took a place opposite Jinnai who placed his hands on the numbered grooves. I bent under the camouflage net and looked through the window. The circle-halves of the focusing system were totally separated and the background was blurred beyond having any proper shapes. All I could see were blobs of fuzzy color.

Flicking a dial to adjust the lighting sensitivity, a little wand next to the circles moved up until it was centered where I needed it. Then the actual focusing began. Justin and Jinnai slowly turned the dials with each directional command.

At first there was a little confusion with what directions I was talking about. When I said "right" Justin had to push the rings up while Jinnai pulled down. When I said "left", the opposite had to happen. Luckily it didn't take long for us to become coordinated.

As if it were teasing me, the focus of the powerful lens began to take shape. The unrecognizable blobs turned into trees, bushes... and movement. My heart pounded as I watched the still small shapes moving through the trees. They were still a way off but I knew exactly what I was looking at.

FREEZE FRAME

With one more turn the circle-halves meshed into one and the figures appeared. I gulped as I wiped my eyes. Just the mere sight of the poachers brought back memories I rather would have forgotten entirely.

They were very close, their camp just on the edge of the forest spilling into the grass of the valley.

As I stared through the lens I didn't realize how lost in myself I had become. All I could do was watch the figures rustling in the distance as visions of past incidents ran through my mind like a stuttering film.

"Anna?"

I looked over my shoulder, still stunned. Jinnai had lifted the natural drape and was watching me with apprehension in his voice. "Is everything okay? You got terribly quiet."

I emerged from the tent-like crevice, my mind a haze. I stood between the two rats, not even looking at them. Instead I stared beyond them, looking at nothing my mind filled with thought and blank like a slate at the same time.

Justin gathered the courage to break the awkward silence. "So, do you see anything? Does the lens work?"

I looked up at him, tears dripping off my whiskers.

"Yes," I answered with a hoarse croak. "The lens works. It works all too well."



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Challenge

Word had spread of the impending danger as quick as we found out ourselves. An emergency meeting had been called and the air thick with anxious energy. As we made our way I glanced over at Jinnai who was deep in his own thoughts, his face unusually serious.

The meeting hall was the largest space in the community as well as the most elaborately designed. It was a deep conical pit rather than a large room, widest at the top then tapering down. It was roofed with a buttressed stone dome with cut tiers in the sides lined with wooden benches. All the seats faced a circular stage at the very bottom. Numerous glowing lamps, similar to those in the cafeteria, hung from chains affixed to the ceiling.

I lingered beside Jinnai next to the oversized double doors, watching rat after rat pass through its arches. I was casual in my assumption that we were waiting for the crowd to thin before entering.

"Mother, over here!"

Jinnai waved over the herd while I struggled to catch a glimpse of who he was referring to.

At once a light gray rat wearing a plain white tunic came over to her son, hugging him while planing a kiss on the cheek.

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"I heard what happened to you," she said with the concern only a parent could have. "Are you really okay?" She looked him over as if no matter what he said could convince her of otherwise. "By the time I got word you were in the infirmary you were already gone. Thank goodness the nurse knew enough to tell me you were okay."

The pitch in her voice made Jinnai blush as he hid a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry mother," he replied, embarrassed at his oversight. "You know how things get around here."

"Especially after a promotion that almost gets you killed." Her voice grew quite serious. "But I guess that's the risk that comes with the job."

"It wasn't as bad as it sounds," Jinnai answered trying to calm her.

"Serious enough to warrant a meeting like this." She stared at him through an arched eyebrow.

On impulse Jinnai glanced over to me, catching the smile I held at his scolding. He soon had the last laugh as the gray she-rat noticed his switched attention.

"So, you must be Anna."

Her voice switched from concern to sweet excitement. Her tone and focus made me jump anxiously.

FREEZE FRAME

"I have to apologize for not meeting you after the concert." She gave my hand a comforting grasp. "I'm afraid my son takes after me when it comes to avoiding crowded areas. Too bad we can't avoid this one."

"I'm sorry we couldn't have met under less trying circumstances," I answered. "I wouldn't exactly call this the ideal time to meet with someone's parent."

"Patricia," Jinnai's mother replied. "I'd rather you call me that than 'someone's parent'. It makes me sound like a frump. I may be old, but not that old."

We all chuckled easing the tension, yet the moment ended at the sound of a gavel pounding from inside the chamber.

"We better get in there. That's the only warning call we're going to get."

Jinnai took my hand to make sure I didn't get lost in the last of the crowd and the three of us made our way to the lower tiers.

Justin had long continued ahead and met up with the guards I recognized from the infirmary. They stood on the stage conversing as they waited.

We took our seats near the podium. Jinnai let go of my hand, unsure of continuing a simple show of public affection at such a dour moment. I grasped his hand back much to his relief. As I watched Justin

with his tense posture, I gripped his hand tighter than before. Even though I knew what the meeting was about, I couldn't help but feel nervous.

Breaking the suspense, Justin turned to the anticipating audience.

"Okay, a few of you may know some of the details but for the rest of you, I'm just going to put it simply. The poachers working the Valley have returned, this time heading in our direction."

Justin paused then continued. "Truthfully, we're not sure if they are continuing this way but they are too close for any sense of comfort and normalcy. It is for this reason that I called an end all outdoor activity except emergency tasks such as camouflaging the compound."

The collective gasp echoed through the room, catching my own breath as well. The poachers... Had I been here that long that I had almost forgotten? The conversation in the infirmary made my skin crawl but nothing brought it all back than seeing them again, even if it was from a distance through a camera lens.

"Three individuals out of seven are all that's left of a group that was sent out early morning. Their goal was to get any information they could especially where they were heading and how long they were staying. Our group was ambushed and trapped but unlike the first excursion no casualties were reported. Just a couple of bad scratches but nothing Mr. Ages can't fix."

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Now everyone was confused. What would poachers want with live rats? I found myself breathing harder as memories began to return like a slowly breaking dam. With every word my entire filled with deep fear.

Jinnai couldn't help but notice the change. I gave a weak smile. New memories flashed but just as I noticed something the image would disappear like a fog. I grew frustrated with myself. What was it I was trying to remember?

Justin went on. "This time the poachers are keeping the rats alive. We're unsure why but I'm not going to question it. Alive is good. Either way, any continued movement will bring them right on top of us. Camouflage will not be enough. We are going to have to fortify ourselves along with putting together a rescue party. The remainder will head on down into the service tunnels bringing as much supplies as possible. We're going to have to lay low until the two men move on."

His demeanor was optimistic, opposite of mine. He did believe all they had to do was make themselves invisible and the poachers would move on. It was something I doubted highly.

I leaned over to Jinnai. "This has happened before?" I whispered. Jinnai gave a quick nod.

"Yes, except that time we were chased. If it weren't for Mrs. Brisby and the Stone, N.I.M.H. would have captured all of us for certain. They were planning on digging us up and everything..."

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

I didn't hear the last of his sentence as a roaring rushed through my ears.

"Nimh?" I stuttered. "Did you just say *N.I.M.H.*?"

Before Jinnai could answer, the last of Justin's speech caught my attention.

"As dangerous as they are, they are not here for us. They just want their bounty but we still have to be very careful with what we do. I will chose individuals for the rescue mission to get back out captured friends. If they think a cage can hold us, they've obviously never met the Rats of N.I.M.H."

My entire body froze. He meant those words to be a battle cry but instead those four little letters sealed their fate.

"*N.I.M.H...*" I whispered with each letter dripping. In the span of that moment all the pieces shattered together.

These rats are not here because of some arcane magic trapped within the recesses of a ruby stone on a gold ring. These are not the creatures of magic like I was and assumed they all were. These were the escaped children of science and now the scientists want them back.

The image of scattered papers in a dark tent became prominent in my mind, the words N.I.M.H. at the top of every page.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

As Jinnai turned, I let out a loud desperate moan.

FREEZE FRAME

"Why didn't anyone tell me?!" I stood up, startling everyone. "You don't understand, it is N.I.M.H! You are the bounty! You are what they're here for!"

My words stuck each individual with horror. Jinnai grabbed me as I collapsed onto the floor in the aisle. My head was spinning and chest hurt from shallow desperate breathing. My panic attack was coming on strong

"What are you talking about?" Justin asked with a desperate tone. "What do you mean N.I.M.H. is involved? You must be mistaken. They're poachers not scientists."

Through wide, half-glazed eyes I looked past him. "How could I have forgotten? How could I have missed it? All the answers were right in front of me the whole time. Three-thousand dollars. That's how much you're worth. The poaching, it's them just taking advantage. They're here for you."

"What do you remember," Justin forced, trying to keep his own composure. He wanted so much to tell me I was being hysterical and irrational. That it was all about the stress of my past experience.

I knew what I saw. And I knew what was happening. "Dr. Schultz," I replied. It was all anyone had to hear.

Every rat began to speak urgently at the same time.

"That can't be," yelled one.

"What if it's true?" yelled another.

"They'll wipe us out! We have to leave!"

I sat there on the floor trembling at the memories my transformation pushed back but could no longer hold.

Justin stepped back to the podium amid the frantic chattering, whatever confidence now shattered. Listening to the crazed chorus behind him, he raised his hands letting out a deep sigh.

"All this time Anna had known. I was so caught up in her unique situation I didn't bring up anything that could have helped her memory. It was my responsibility make sure the original mission was not forgotten and forgetting was the first thing I did." He lowered his eyes, ashamed to look at the people who depended on him for so much.

"I have no reason to believe her words are not true," he continued. "There is no reason she would know Dr. Schultz's name unless there was a connection between him and the poachers and we already know what the poachers are willing to do to keep anyone from stopping them."

His voice became even more somber. "It's only been a couple of months since the last attempt on our home. Thanks to the Stone, we were able to protect ourselves. But now..."

I raised my head, staring at the demoralized leader.

FREEZE FRAME

"We have neither the resources nor the strength to fight a direct assault again. Even if we dig in our heels, they have proven their determination. They will come after us."

He paused, swallowing hard as he fought his own breakdown. "It is with a heavy heart that I must say this. As long as Dr. Schultz knows we're here, we will always be in danger." Justin let out a long, controlled breath. "We must leave Thorn Valley."

Those words frightened the rats more than any mention of N.I.M.H. Jinnai buried his head in my hair. Even though he had thought about leaving, this was still his home. Now that he was faced with the reality of being forced out he couldn't help but get emotional. I heard a hushed sob as he held me tighter.

Just as the rats were settling in to the prospect of leaving I was finding myself with newfound resolve. I was surprised at their willingness to abandon everything.

"No, you can't give up. What do you mean leave? You're just going to let them drive you out of your home?"

I scanned the saddened faces. This may have not been their first time protecting their home but this was the first time they were accepting defeat without a fight.

"It's a last resort I hoped we would never use," Justin continued. "If we leave it can't be as a whole. We have to scatter into family groups or

smaller even. As a community we would always be vulnerable to exposure and constant threats."

The next words were especially hard.

"The Rats of N.I.M.H. can never be reunited if we do separate. After the last attack, we hoped Dr. Schultz learned his lesson. That is obviously... not the case."

Justin opened his eyes sensing my gaze. "We have no choice," he answered with strange calm.

At those words all the dread that had been swimming in my stomach disappeared. Fear moved aside allowing a stronger emotion to come forth.

Anger.

I didn't want to embarrass Justin or undermine his authority however there no way I was going to accept this.

"Of course you have a choice," I said, beginning to raise my voice. "You always have a choice. You just said the Stone helped you win the last time something happened. Why do you think it will abandon you now?"

"I do not have control of its power." Justin was conflicted at my defiant tone. "As much as we want to, as much as we need to, we cannot depend on it coming through at the last minute."

There was no turning back.

FREEZE FRAME

"So you're willing to abandon all this?" I gestured to the whole of the glorious hall. "You're going to desert everything you've worked so hard for? Everything you hold dear?"

Justin grew impatient with my public challenge. I took a deep breath, holding my stance. I couldn't afford to show weakness now.

"You don't know what we've already been through," he snapped. "I can't keep asking everyone to continually sacrifice themselves."

My impatience and anger grew with every word. "Sacrifice is always what we must be willing to do for our homes and families. What do you think you're asking them to do now? Start life anew? Where are you going to go? If you can't keep your utopia in the middle of a protected reserve what makes you think anyplace else will be better?"

I spun, aiming my challenge to everyone in the hall.

"What makes you think N.I.M.H. won't find you there as well? Do you really think no one will notice your presence anywhere? You think I'm an anomaly? You aren't normal rats either and will surely attract attention no matter how hard you try not to."

I could hear the hard thinking, the self-doubt, and the thoughts that reminded them of what had to be done. I turned back to Justin who was doing some thinking of his own.

"We still need to form a rescue team," Justin replied trying to change the subject.

"And then what?"

Justin's patience wore thin. "What would you suggest? You think after a week living here you know better than us?"

"This is my home," I answered without faltering. "You are my family. I cannot and will not turn my back on this. The Stone did not change me to run. These poachers will not stop until they have enough, if not all of you captured. They must be stopped."

One of the rats from the original captured team stepped forward. "How are we supposed to take on poachers who have proven they will not hesitate to kill humans? I doubt they have any more care for rats."

My eyes narrowed, memories of the brutal men emblazoned in my mind. "Not if we strike them first," I answered with all seriousness.

The collective silence was deafening. The surprise on Justin's face filled me with as much surprise of my own, but I did not show it.

"She means war..." I heard a low voice answer.

War? I was surprised at the use of the word. I wouldn't exactly call what needed to be done a war however the scope was large enough to be confused for one.

"Remember when I first came to Valley? When I was human? You had me tied up and I never noticed it happened until I woke up. You did it to protect your home. This is no different except it requires more

FREEZE FRAME

aggression on our part. We're not talking about killing anyone or getting anyone killed."

A plan started to come together in my head. "We can stop them, especially if we can get the rangers involved."

The idea seemed even more incredible than stopping the poachers.

"Get more humans involved?" another voice squealed. "That would destroy our home for sure!"

"Not if it's done right," I answered back. "We'll still need two groups but it's going to be a lot more than just a rescue mission. We're going to put those poachers out of commission and get the rangers to come across them soon after we leave. We can't give them any time to escape."

I walked down towards Justin who greeted me with a cool smile, looking at me for the first time not as a scared little girl but as an equal.

I answered his smile with a sheepish shrugging of my shoulders.

Realizing he could not back down from what I started Justin looked up towards the anxious yet eager audience, desperate for his final word. "As Anna said, we have a mission to organize and if what she says is correct, we have less time than we think."

A rumbling waved through the crowd at his words, fear slowly being replaced by hope. As I scanned the room, my chest tightened at the sight of Jinnai. Instead of sharing in the nervous excitement of what had to

be done, he was solemn in his posture, a combination of anger and sadness in his eyes. I found myself unable to smile.

As the day wore on our plans began to come to some fruition. The community was divided into three groups. The largest was the home team, whose responsibility was fortifying the rats' home - covering windows, bracing doors, and setting up the deep underground tunnels for the mass exodus that would have to take place if the poachers decided to start their hunt before we could get to them first.

The second team was the rescue party. They were the smallest group made up of strong yet agile rats. Wherever the cage-trap was in the campsite, stealth was of the necessity.

The last and largest group was the attack team. The hub of the plan rested on them. The plan was based on the hope that the two men could be tied up without incident as they slept. If such peaceful means were unable to be accomplished, then brute force had to be relied on.

This worried many. No one had ever attacked a human before except for Justin who had done so to protect me, but that was nothing more than a distraction. This time the attack would have to be constant enough to slow the men down.

Everyone was scrambling with whatever work had to be done until Justin ordered sleep shifts. Better to get some rest as opposed to none.

FREEZE FRAME

I sat outside hidden behind the main entrance among the rocks. Eddie was sleeping in a cave nearby, something I envied. I felt exhausted but my body wouldn't allow me to shut down. I was hoping some fresh air would help clear my head.

"Anna?"

My ears twitched at the voice. I could hardly see the dark shape coming towards me, seeing only a careful walking silhouette. Jinnai felt his way in the dark, taking a spot next to me. We sat in silence as we watched the stars shine above us.

"So I take it you couldn't sleep either," Jinnai said, not taking his eyes off the sky.

I nodded with a simple "hmmm..."

"I've never seen everyone so wound up," he continued. "Even I'm a bit nervous. We've never made the first move. Usually it was them against us."

"It's easy to run," I answered, glancing over at him. "It's so easy to give up and accept what you think fate is handing you when in the end it's really you who's deciding to take the short straw." My throat went dry, forcing me to pause. "Fate gives you the tools, the opportunity. But in the end it's always up to you to make the most of it. Despite what a lot of people say, the meek do not inherit the earth."

I shuffled, fighting the tight, tickling urge in my throat. I chalked the sensation up to nerves and exhaustion.

"You're not talking about what's going on now are you," Jinnai replied. "There's something else going in your mind."

I remained quiet, not sure if I wanted to continue the discussion. Jinnai took my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Do you miss being human?" he asked unsure if he wanted to hear the answer.

I let out a soft breath. "I don't know." I shrugged my shoulders, hiding my face behind locks of red. "I thought I was a pretty miserable person as a human being - a struggling photographer opposite my successful Assistant DA sister. It was... still is kind of difficult."

My mind was awash with conflicting emotions and memories. The more I spoke, the more I was having trouble reigning them in.

"Ever since this happened, everything I thought was a big problem turned out to be really not so important. At the same time though I'm facing something that could have greater repercussions than anything I've ever worried about. My human life seems pretty easy now."

"But do you miss it?" Jinnai asked again.

"It's still a part of me." A deep sadness stung at my insides. "As much as I'd like to say I'm completely over being human, I'm not. My memories are still human as well as the way I think. Even the way I feel is

FREEZE FRAME

all from my human experience. I don't know if I could forget my past like that."

I hesitated, gathering the courage to voice my ultimate concern.

"The worst part is that I don't think I'm meant to forget at all. I... I have this feeling that whatever magic that stone possesses... isn't... permanent."

"What do you mean by that?" Jinnai let out a nervous cough.

I sighed again. "I can't explain it. I just have this feeling that I'm not going to be here much longer."

"No, don't say that." Jinnai gulped hard. "Tell me you'll stay. I can't..." He lowered his head, his eyes closing tight as he attempted to contain himself.

Watching him breaking down was too much for me to bear. "I don't know what the magic will do," I answered trying to calm his fears that echoed my own. "For all I know my nagging feeling is just nerves."

The restrained outrage in his blue eyes startled me. "I don't want to believe the Stone brought you here just to take you away. I've put up with a lot but the thought of not being with you tears me up inside. You have no idea."

Even though his ire was not aimed at me I felt uncomfortable at Jinnai's words.

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"We've only known each other for such a small amount of time," I replied, hating myself. "You can't possibly tell me that you feel this strongly. I mean, we've certainly *shared* but I don't think..."

Jinnai shrank at my comment. "You don't... feel the same way...?"

I choked at the implication. "It depends on how *you* feel."

My heart pounded like a drum in my chest. I didn't want to continue, but I had to. I couldn't allow the conversation to end here, not when I felt the way I did. "Jinnai, please don't make it harder than it is. You know as much as I do that this can't last... it won't last..."

Jinnai grabbed my arms forcing me to face him.

"No, I won't be a slave to that Stone," he said, desperate. "Maybe you're right. Maybe the magic will eventually change you back. Then maybe it won't. Either way, if I have to live with the realization that you will not be with me then tell me how you feel. Leave me at least that. Until then I want you to know how I feel. I want you to stay with me. I don't care how long it takes for the magic to do what it wants but say you'll share your life with me."

I started sobbing. "Jinnai... please..."

He pulled me close to him, his muzzle nuzzling my ear. "Anna, don't you understand? *I love you...*"

A small moan escaped my lips at those words as the tears I fought so hard to keep back cascaded down my face.

FREEZE FRAME

"I do understand," I gasped. "I understand..." I held out my hands, cupping his beautiful face. "I've loved you since I first saw you."

We held each other behind the rocks, but it wasn't joy that entered our hearts. The revelation only filled us with the reality that our time together was more fleeting than the night itself. Yet instead of dwelling on what time we didn't have we decided to make the most of the time we did.

As we lowered ourselves onto the ground we cursed the magic, defying it as our bodies came together as one, our passions challenging whatever path the Stone laid out.

And the stars shone brightly overhead, bearing witness.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A Simple Plan

The forest rose from a silver mist sparkling in the dawn sun. Instead of teeming with life it was silent under overcast skies. Faint spots of blue broke through the dark clouds as the air snapped with an unusual, eerie chill.

I clutched my tunic in a weak attempt to warm up, uncertain if the problem was indeed the weather or something more internal. The beauty of the valley was lost as my mind swirled, my teeth chattering as I fought to control raging emotions. Butterflies danced in my stomach as I made my way down the rock.

The quiet of the outside extended into the main gathering area. I found myself surrounded by somber rats strapping swords to their sides along with looping coils of ropes on their shoulders. Justin walked around supervising the group, his demeanor not betraying any fear he might be feeling.

The sword around his slim waist was worn but well taken care of, a favorite possession perhaps. I couldn't help but wonder. Was that sword used in the infamous incident that made Jinnai's life miserable by association?

"Are you all right?"

I found myself unable to be more excited at seeing Jinnai.

He held a long scabbard, hesitating in handing the weapon to me. I gulped hard as I glanced over the polished hilt and the untouched leather. Nausea tickled the back of my throat.

Why did I have to speak up? I berated myself as I looked up at Jinnai with apologetic eyes. *Why couldn't I just let the rats deal with this the way they wanted to? I had no right to speak up at all. I don't even belong here!*

"You don't have to do this." Jinnai read my face with accuracy. "Go with the others. Worry about hiding and sealing up the place. Leave the fighting to us, please."

Worry rode on his voice. He didn't want me getting involved any more than I wanted to. However none of this was about what we wanted. With one more swallow I reached out, taking the sword. Jinnai lowered his eyes disappointed yet both of us knowing it had to be.

I held the sword in nervous hands. It was heavier that it looked, the cool metal radiating through the leather. I tightened my palm around the scabbard, pushing in the shaped hide. The razor sharp edge pressed the surface, my fingers flinching at the realization as to what I held. My mind went blank. With one motion, I took the belt, fastening the buckle snugly.

FREEZE FRAME

The weight hung strangely against my hip. There was no turning back now.

I found it ironic I was more daring and courageous as a rat than I ever was as a full-grown woman. Death was no longer something to be feared. It became a challenge that had to be overcome at all costs.

As I draped a coil of rope over my shoulder, I noticed Justin's ensemble. His tunic was of thick leather, giving a soft squeaking as he walked. The snug collar encircled his neck and white woolen sleeves covered his arms. The Stone stood out from the dark leather; its gold and ruby brilliance glimmering with unearthly radiance.

Justin wasn't concerned about wearing such a seemingly delicate artifact on our mission. The Stone was more than a piece of jewelry. Even though he had questioned whether its magic would protect them it was obvious that he was not going to take any chances without it.

"The plan is simple but by no means will that guarantee our victory." Justin's voice echoed in the hall. "It would have been safer for us to do this during the night while they slept but time is not on our side. These are experienced woodsmen. Even if we were to tie them up they would be able to get out of their bonds before daybreak."

He took a deep breath and continued.

"This makes this mission even more perilous. We will be out in full view and the poachers will know exactly what we are doing to them.

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The only good I see is that we are worth more alive but only if we are extremely lucky. I highly doubt they've had their prey fight back to this extent."

The rats hung onto every word.

"If any of you want to back out now, you are free to do so, nor do I blame you."

Silence greeted the invitation.

Justin turned his entire body, motioning everyone's attention to me. It was uncomfortable but my body straightened, my head held high. My mind was strangely lucid, focused on the mission before us. I could no longer be the cowering waif I was used to being, crying at every moment of faintest stress.

The wallflower withered as thorny brambles grew in its place.

"Eddie will be handling the horses," I started, almost startled by the sound of my own voice. "Those horses will be proof to the rangers at the station that there is something wrong going on. It will be them that will hopefully lead them to us."

A nervous murmuring slipped through the hall.

I continued. "Be aware of any traps that may be set around the perimeter. Most importantly though, beware the guns. When I last was there I noticed only a couple of rifles yet it only takes one to wipe out an entire group."

FREEZE FRAME

My mind went blank as Justin took over, the fear and apprehension returning as what little courage I displayed dissipated. I leaned back on Jinnai who kept me from totally falling over. Twangs of remorse brewed as I scanned the sea of volunteers, still unsure what lied ahead. I entwined my fingers around Jinnai's, squeezing tightly.

"This is the most dangerous mission the Rats of N.I.M.H. have ever faced," Justin continued. "Some of us may not return when all this is over. You all know it is a risk I myself am willing to take. Nevertheless there is one thing we must remember. If we have nothing to die for, there is nothing for us to live for."

With those words we began our exodus above ground, weapons and coils rustling and clanging. As the warm morning sun shone on my face I dreaded the reality of not returning. I glanced over at Jinnai who flashed a reserved smile. The same thought was going through his as well.

As we disappeared into the grass, we made our way towards the camp, the anticipation eating away at all of us.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Door and The Key

The ebony bird perched on a swaying branch above, giving a low caw. The signal sent the first group into action, uncoiling their ropes to set a border around the camp. A smaller group began their search of the empty but far from abandoned campsite for the live trap containing our comrades.

They unraveled the coils of rope from their shoulders, threading it until it could be tied to another rope end. An anchor point was created around a nearby tree. As the slack length of rope came down, we pushed soil and leaves over it.

I nervously scanned the area, cursing that the rangers' horses were nowhere to be seen. Eddie would have to do his work of convincing the horses to escape in front of the poachers. I hoped the group in the tents would find all the guns and unload everything in time.

There was an excited scurrying as a rat happily waved from the tent farthest from us. He stood in front of the fold entrance, giving a thumbs-up signal. The trapped rats have been found. Justin looked up enough to give a return signal and went back to tying rope. The rat disappeared back into the tent.

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Morale all around jumped to a new level. I gave out a sigh of relief. At least one part of our mission would be solved without incident.

But of course, I had spoken too soon.

Our already alert ears perked up in unison, our noses picking up the pungent scent. The crow above us gave a second caw, this time the sound sending a chill down my spine. He flew from his perch in a ruffle of feathers.

"Everybody down!" Justin yelled.

Without questioning, the tiny soldiers lowered to the dark soil, our bodies pinned as flat as we could go.

My heart raced, my breathing echoing in my ears. A tickling started in the back of my throat as the smell of human sweat, and general filth filled my senses. I remembered Nancy's comment on how humans had a very specific scent. Now I knew for myself and only hoped that my own human form did not offend her as I was being offended now.

Stan, The younger of the two poachers lumbered into camp with one of the horses, their bounty weighing heavy. Exhausted, he tossed the reins onto a shrub, continuing towards the tents as he rubbed his weary face.

The hard work was wearing thin as did being in the wilderness too long. His face also betrayed the annoyance for his partner and for a split moment I found myself feeling sorry for him.

FREEZE FRAME

The need to do something was powerful but we couldn't reveal ourselves so soon. I forced myself to slow my breathing, trying to clear my head and not allow impulsive behaviors to take over. My fingers curled tightly into fists, my claws digging into my palms.

Clank-chunk!

The noise was enough to snap Stan out of his stupor, spinning in the direction of the storage tent. He said nothing as he listened for the sound to repeat itself.

Nothing.

My hands were shaking. To think that the plan was about to come to an end so soon!

The poacher returned to the horse's burden, the smell of freshly skinned hides overwhelming. There was a soft rustling as Justin rose from the ground. We continued our work slower and more cautious than before.

Clank... clunk...!

All the rats froze as the banging noise echoed through the campsite again.

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What is it with them?! I thought with urgent frustration. We'll get caught for sure!

Justin watched the supply tent with a stern grimace that turned to a nervous snarl. Stan decided not to dismiss the sound the second time around.

Picking up a fallen branch he inched his way towards the supply tent. He studied the entrance, poking at the fabric then pushing it aside.

"What the? Holy...!"

The tent exploded as rats burst through, scattering each way they could around the human. One lunged at Stan but I couldn't tell if it was accidental or a deliberate attempt to get him out of the way. Stan stumbled back, punching at the rat that clung tight to his shirt. With a frenzied swing, the brown body fell to the ground stunned.

no...

Stan staggered back, glad to have rid himself of the attacker but he was not finished yet. Catching his breath he raised the stick.

No...

The branch came down with a forceful swing and a primal growl.

NOOOO!

A sickening thud met our ears, blood splattering against the ground. I snapped my head as a large blur rushed through our group with Justin attempting to grab at him. The loyal guard ignored his leader.

FREEZE FRAME

Brutus clutched his poleax with a strength that turned his knuckles pale, a guttural screech emerging from his throat. Stan swung the heavy branch unaware of the beast coming towards him as others ran away.

The steel spear was brought down in a rain of rage, piercing the hard leather boot. Brutus didn't react to the thrashing as Stan realized he was impaled. Gripping the handle, the dark rat continued his revenge.

With a forceful pull, the axe came out, splattering blood from its points. He swung the blade in a wide arch towards the ankle finding its mark in the poacher's achilles' tendon. Brutus gave a wicked smile as the human fell back in searing pain, the foot useless beneath him.

There was no time to think. We rushed forward with coils in hand. Although now quiet, Stan's shock in being surrounded didn't do much for keeping him still.

As the ropes encircled his wrists and feet, he began to strike out. We held fast, using all our strength to tie the knots. My arms ached and my hands burned but I refused to abandon my task.

Inspired by Brutus' example, another large rat jumped forward with his spear. Frustrated with the unruly human's movement, he brought down his weapon going through the hand we were trying so hard to tie down.

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

"No! No more!" Justin screamed, enraged and horrified by how quickly the plan was disintegrating into bloodlust. "No killing! We are not here to kill them!"

Whether anyone was listening was yet to be seen.

"What the hell is going on here?!"

Time froze as the second poacher burst from the wood. Stan arched his neck. He lay pinned, unable to move, as his body stood conquered by the rats over him.

Like a wave we charged. Unsure as to what was going on yet still aware of what he had to do, Ray dodged our initial attacks, slapping away the nooses we attempted to get on him.

Confused, he bolted to the side. As he reached the perimeter, rats still hiding in the brush popped up, heaving taut a rope tied to a tree.

As his boot slipped under the rope, they bolted from their positions, crossing the lines. With every ounce of strength they pulled as they ran, digging their claws into the earth.

There was the sudden wave of arms then feet tossing debris into the air. The second poacher was down but our job was far from over. He was determined not to be as easily caught as his partner.

Looping my rope I began to run towards them. As I neared, the ground exploded with a roar and I felt myself being hurtled. My ears rang as I shook the stupor off, my side and head aching with dull pain.

FREEZE FRAME

A pair of hands grabbed me, pulling me underneath low-lying growth. As my blurry eyes cleared I saw everyone scattering as another concentrated gust of leaves and soil erupted from the ground.

"He's shooting!"

Ray was tied but was far from incapacitated. In his trembling hands the revolver jerked back violently with another boom.

"He's shooting us! He can't!" I lunged forward only to feel the hands grab at my arms. Jinnai held me fast, refusing to let me leave from the makeshift shelter.

"No! There's nothing you can do!" he yelled, his grip tightening. "You're already hurt, I'm not going to let you get killed!"

"He's going to kill us anyway!" I screamed back, the panic overwhelming me. "We have to stop him!"

Justin's voice rose above the fray. The nooses flew to catch the gun, one lucky throw encircling the muzzle. The rats yanked the rope, throwing Ray off guard. He jerked his hand back, sending the quartet of rats flying. Without enough leverage could not hold the movement in check.

They crashed into a nearby tree, the force sending them violently bouncing towards the ground. Ray aimed his gun in their direction.

"Justin!" I jumped from my hiding spot into the frenzied commotion, not even realizing I had fallen to all fours as I ran.

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Bodies in motion blurred all around, no one stopping for me to recognize the smallest of details. My ears roared with incomprehensible noise, my muscles burning with desperate energy. The brush engulfed me and I clutched at broken branches trying to find someone, anyone from that group.

Especially Justin. I had to find Justin!

I screamed his name, finding myself unable to compete with the sounds that surrounded us. My voice cracked, my throat turning painfully hoarse.

Why won't he answer?

I took a few more panicked steps, finding my hand covering my nose in an instinctive motion. The dull metallic smell clung in the air, not enough to be overwhelming but enough for my sensitive rodent senses to pick up. My eyes ached as I stared at the base of a tree root. A glint of sunlight reflected off of something partially hidden underneath.

I didn't want to get closer however I forced each move. A slow gasp hissed from behind my hand as I recognized the relic hiding in the dirt, the gold ring with the ruby stone at its center.

With trembling hands I picked up the Stone, the gold surface marred by dark, streaking stains I hoped was mud. My wrinkling nose told me otherwise.

FREEZE FRAME

I stared at the stone, gripping at its edges tighter as I shook harder. My eyes clouded up and my teeth bared in a tight snarl, my rage flowing.

"No, it's not going to end this way," I growled, not recognizing my own voice. "I refuse to end it this way."

You can unlock any door if you only have the key...

Raising my head I encircled the unbroken chain around the neck, the stone dangling with an unusual lightness for its size.

Narrowing my gaze I gripped the hilt of the sword at my waist, the unblemished steel ringing as it unsheathed from the scabbard. With a low crouch, I turned, facing Ray's direction. He had managed to finally empty his gun but still struggled with his rodent captors.

Dragging the sword I drew a line before me in the soil. Before me was my door, The silver blade my key.

"It stops now."

I rushed towards the poacher. Reaching out, I leapt into the air, a fistful of flannel meeting my grip. Ray continued squirming but I held fast. I heard my name echoing below me but this piecemeal was mine. Unsure of my grasp I decided to reinforce my position. With a swing I plunged the sword through the fabric onto flesh, using the leverage to continue my climb.

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I rode the waves with a skill that I refused to question. My mission was clear as I pulled the sword and repeated the gesture. Gripping more fabric I made it to the horrified poacher's chest, my sword slick.

The ropes pulled tight against him. He could only raise his head and stare at me with a combination of horror, rage, and fascination.

"Get off of me!" he screeched as I inched closer. "You fucking lab freaks, I'll get every single one of you!"

The stone gave a bright shimmer, just enough for me to notice but I disregarded the display as a play of light.

"SHUT UP!" I screamed back, raising the sword, swinging it close enough to slice his chin open.

Ray froze slack-jawed. At first I thought it was because of his bleeding face, but I realized there was another look in his eyes.

It was comprehension.

I spared no time to marvel at it. I jumped forward, placing my foot over his mouth, digging into his tough lips with my claws.

"So now you know our secret," I replied to him. I lifted the sword blade down like a cane, resting the point right between his eyes. A muffled whimper leaked from beneath my toes.

"Despite everything you've done, despite all you know, we're going to remain a secret. Do you know how?" I leaned forward, adding pressure to the blade. A trickle of blood began to run down his nose.

FREEZE FRAME

"Well?" I stressed, pushing further.

Ray whimpered again. He nodded slightly but the steady ropes kept him from moving.

"I've heard that once the human jugular is severed, you only have 2 and a half minutes to live. Do you think that's true?"

"No please..." he replied, trying not to move.

"What happened? Death only convenient when it's not you?" I mocked. "Only rangers deserve that fate? Photographers? Rats?"

I leaned in so close Ray squinted tightly. "Filthy murderer. It's the least you deserve."

I jumped hard onto his throat, Ray choking on the pressure. I looked over, seeing the throbbing vein that was my target.

I grabbed the hilt with both my hands and raised the stained blade.

Two minutes would be too long.

"Anna! No! Don't do it!"

I stopped mid swing, my head snapping up. "Justin?"

I looked down and saw the face I had tried to find, only to find the Stone instead. Justin stood below me battered, his shoulder bleeding but all right. The thick leather armor had done its job but had become worse for wear.

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He held out his arms, his hands opened wide to punctuate his pleading. "Don't do what you're going to do," he repeated, his voice stern but worried.

"It's the only way," I replied. "They'll only come back! They'll destroy us all!"

I felt a presence come up from behind me, gently encircling my tight hands with his own, pushing the sword down.

"No one can destroy us," Jinnai's voice answered. "We are Rats of N.I.M.H. We live and die on our terms, not theirs."

My body weakened and my hands began to tremble but this time not of rage. With my blade safely down, Jinnai lifted me into his arms and leapt down onto the ground. Justin rushed to our side but kept a slight distance to not be suffocating.

"He has to die..." The words came out hesitant, the conviction of moments before gone. I buried myself in Jinnai's embrace, the Stone shimmering around my neck.

Justin smiled. "You were right, Anna. We don't have to be afraid. Not anymore."

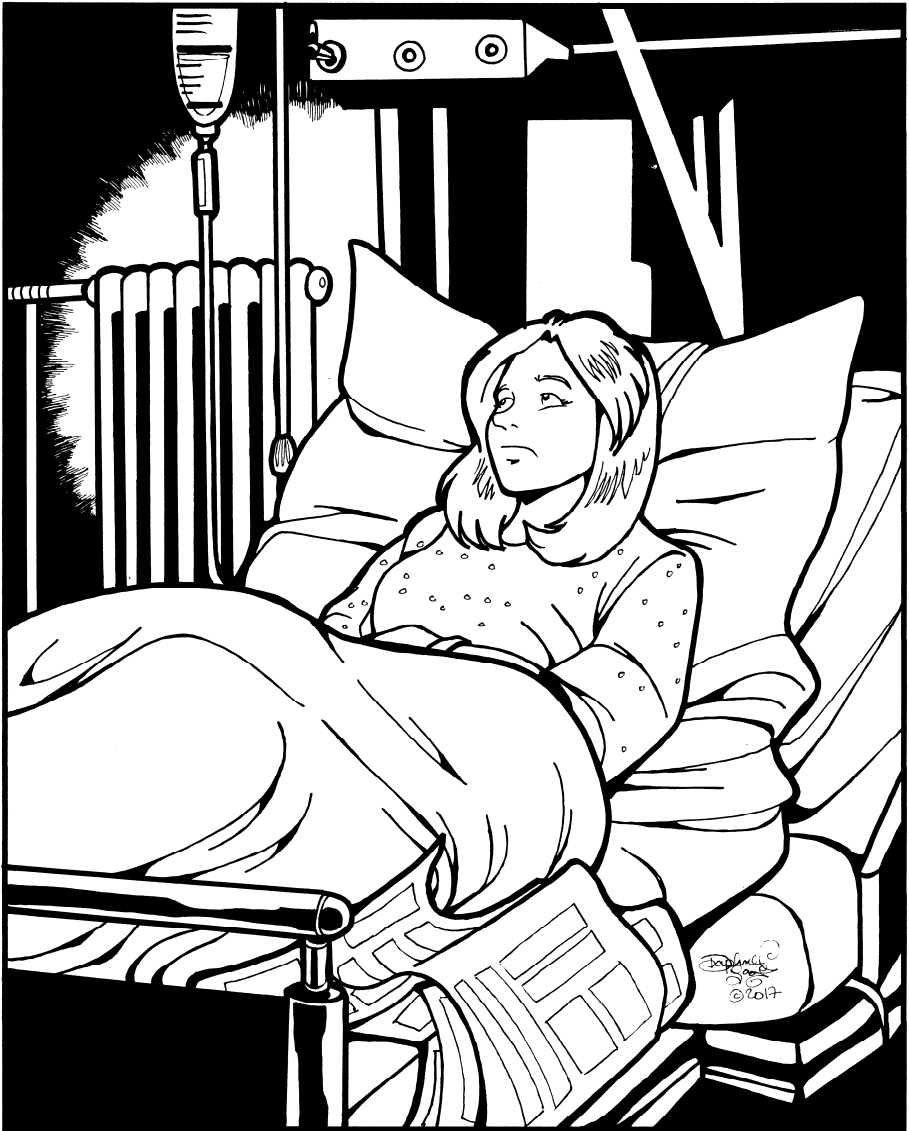
Clutching at Jinnai, I looked up at him as I felt myself breathing faster. I thought I was having a panic attack. I looked down and new tears sprang forth as the Stone glowed with a light I had never seen before. My

FREEZE FRAME

head grew heavy and my grip tightened but I couldn't feel myself. Unlike the first time I knew what was happening.

"You were right..."

And in the background a dog started barking.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Aftermath

"POACHERS CAUGHT IN RANGER DOUBLE MURDER

Duo to be indicted on Fed charges

Upstate - Two poachers have been indicted in federal court for the murder of two wildlife rangers in the Thorn Valley wilderness preserve. The two men face the death penalty if convicted.

Stan Wilson, 27 and Ray Parkinson, 45 will be facing several counts including, murder, trespassing, kidnapping, and the attempted murder of photographer Anna Carmichael, who is currently hospitalized in stable condition.

Ray Parkinson will also be facing additional charges stemming from warrants issued in three other states.

It is unknown how long the poachers had been in the Valley before Wildlife Rangers Michael Henderson and Nick Medvale encountered them. Both rangers were shot at point blank range.

The most surprising element of the case was that the poachers were discovered with the aid of two horses and a dog that escaped from their camp.

It was the dog that clued the station in on the whereabouts of missing photographer Anna Carmichael. Wardens had been looking for

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her as well after she failed to return to a rendezvous point three days after her appointed time.

"These horses just came to the station with the dog on their heels," stated head ranger James Wilson. "At first we thought it was a joke but when we recognized the horses as our own, we knew we had a situation on our hands. It was Ms. Carmichael's dog that led us to the camp where we found the two suspects tied and beaten badly."

No one knows who attacked the poachers and no evidence of other people were found.

Anna Carmichael was a photographer on assignment when it is suspected she was kidnapped by the poachers and held hostage. She is currently being treated at St. Vincents Hospital where she is unable to recall any of the events leading up to her rescue.

"This is very common among survivors of very stressful situations," her doctor noted. "Usually thhis form of temporary amnesia clears up within several weeks to several months depending on the extent of the trauma. With Ms. Charmichel however, it shouldn't hopefully be that long. She's not in as bad of shape as we are used to seeing in similar cases."

The two poachers deny that Ms. Carmichael was in their custody for any longer than one day and that she had disappeared from their camp

FREEZE FRAME

soon after the rangers were murdered. Ms. Carmichael was found unconscious alongside the tied-up poachers.

In an unusual twist, Stan Wilson is pleading to the government for leniency in exchange for information that claims the National Institute of Mental Health hired them to poach the Valley.

Although an initial statement calls the claims "unfounded" and "outrageous" the agency has refused to comment any further on the situation."

The article continued further but Abby chose wisely to not go on with her reading. I sighed loudly as I stared up at the pocked ceiling of the stark hospital room, my mind still in a haze I couldn't get out of.

"Well, at least they spelled our last name right," Abby replied with her usual dry tone accented by the natural hoarseness in her voice. No wonder she made a great assistant DA. No one could ever tell when she was joking.

I glanced over at my dark-haired sister whose chiseled features had been made more so with the stress of me being missing and now in the hospital.

The rustling of the newspaper as she placed it on the bedside table rumbled in my hypersensitive ears. I turned the other way facing the window in a weak attempt to block out the noise. My eyes squinted at the sunlight.

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"The doctors say you'll be able to go home tomorrow," Abby commented. "They say you're doing fine and should be back to normal in no time."

I gave a soft snort at the comment. "Normal. Whatever that means."

I tried to work through the thick fog that was my memory but nothing concrete appeared from the effort. I swallowed hard to keep my fragile emotions in check. I was told I was in the hospital for two weeks yet I only could remember what happened three days ago when I finally woke up.

Abby stood up with restless energy. She paced the side of the bed as she stretched her tense muscles. "I'm going to get something to eat. Do you want anything?"

I shook my head.

Abby stood over me, wiping the wrinkles from the casual skirt and blouse she wore. Even in a hospital she couldn't get out from her work mindset. "By the way, Jack sends his regards."

"Thank you," I mumbled back with a small smile, remembering the disheveled white hair and the childish gleam. I chuckled inside.

Closing my eyes I listened to the sound of Abby's heels against the linoleum floor and the door clicking closed. Finding myself alone I sat up, the effort sending my head swimming.

FREEZE FRAME

The newspaper lay on the table next to the bed. I couldn't help but poke at it as the headline screamed at me. The muddy gray photo underneath especially caught my attention. Pulling the paper I took a closer look. I stared at the coarse dots forming the faces of two men sitting in a courtroom. My gaze zeroed in on the stitched gash in the older poacher's chin and my chest tightened.

Tears welled as I was suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling of intense loss. Slamming the paper down I shook my head trying to place it. I couldn't understand why I was feeling this way. An entire part of my life was missing and I couldn't place a single event, a single incident, a single face.

I lurched over nauseous as a loud sob escaped. My entire body shook and I found myself weeping. Weeping for something I couldn't remember. Something I knew I would never see again.

Weeping for the fact that my heart was broken and I didn't know why.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Epilogue

It had been a whirlwind year.

After coming back to the city, I found myself a cause celebre', the poster child for protecting our wilderness. My photography assignments were still pretty scarce but I had a new calling on the environmental lecture circuit.

Colleges, committees, even Congress, had called on my experience. For the first time I was in quite a bit of demand even garnering a few modest gallery showings of my photos. Okay, I didn't become Annie Leibovitz but it was something.

Could you believe I actually worked the nerve to ask Abby's boss out on a date? Trust me, I was just as surprised as Jack when I flat out asked him. I happened to be visiting Abby when the opportunity presented itself. Without even thinking I blurted the question. Abby was downright horrified if not just embarrassed. It's not every day your younger sister asks your much older boss out on a date in front of you.

He thought I was kidding and until I showed up back at the office later ready for dinner.

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It was fun and we had a nice time. Nothing serious though. He's still cute but the age gap between us was weird especially when the waiter called me his daughter. We laughed about it however we knew the relationship would go nowhere. At least we enjoyed each other's company for a short time. I'm sure Abby was relieved to hear a dinner would be the extent of the experiment.

Funny though. The whole night I had this nagging sensation haunting me the entire time. I kept finding myself comparing Jack to someone but to no one specific, at least not anyone I could remember. And that fact was bothering me too. Just by going out with him felt like I was cheating.

On who though? It's not like I've ever been close to anyone to feel that strongly...

National Park Magazine called me again. They want me to do a follow-up article –‘*Thorn Valley: One Year Later*’. They were hesitant about giving me the assignment, afraid it might not have been enough time for me to recover from my experience. The minute I heard the name Thorn Valley however I didn't even hesitate in saying yes. I needed to go back.

My therapist wasn't too thrilled with me going. She felt there would be a chance I'd end up having a severe panic attack and being in the middle of the woods would make me especially vulnerable. I reassured her I would be okay but I took an extra bottle of medication just in case.

FREEZE FRAME

Just driving back upstate left me a bundle of nerves. On my way to the reserve I made a pit stop at my aunt and uncle's house. Eddie was just as happy to see me as I was of him. He followed me with his usual endless energy, chasing away anything that moved.

I watched as he played in the tall grass, ignoring any of my attempts to control his wild behavior. Conflicting emotions welled, something my therapist told me to watch out for. The more I watched Border collie, the sadder I became.

I felt as if a bond had been severed. Eddie was supposed to be more than a dog but wasn't. I shrugged at the strange notion and made a mental note of the feeling. Just another moment to share with a woman paid to listen to all this crazy talk.

The rangers had locked down the reserve even tighter than last I was there. I had a guide this time around who kept close contact with headquarters as we camped out and hiked. Even though I found her intrusive at the same time I appreciated the company. The meds would stay in my pack unused.

The photos came easy, which I was grateful for since it meant not staying longer than I had to.

We hiked along the edge of a large valley that surrounded the mountains bearing the reserve's name. Scanning over the wide grassy

field, the air had a pleasant tree-scent with just a hint of residual wood smoke.

I stopped suddenly in my tracks, startling my guide. "Something the matter?" she asked as I looked through my camera lens with shaking hands.

Excitement pounded my being as I followed the edge of a small stream, my mind beginning to lift a veil.

"Rats..." I whispered, my heart beating fast. My guide looked at my glazed demeanor with confused concern.

"What happened?" she asked again. "You look like you saw a ghost."

Looking through the lens again, I trailed the area - tall, wild grasses hid common plant food peeking from its center. I could see the dark round holes in the side of the rocks close to the ground. Nearby, thick shrubbery only allowed the faintest peek at what looked like circular track in the grass. With each view my mind began to fill in details I dared not speak aloud. Although I didn't comprehend what I was looking at, something was reminding me that this was meant for me alone.

I breathed in deep, hardly able to conceal my thrill. The corners of my eyes glistened as a huge smile appeared on my face with an even bigger burden lifted from my shoulders.

"I remember," I replied.

FREEZE FRAME

"Remember what?" the ranger asked, looking over the landscape and seeing nothing.

"I had forgotten how beautiful this place is."

Lowering my camera I continued staring. I breathed in the air, the memories returning like a welcome rain.

"Well, aren't you going to photograph it?"

Refusing to answer the question with neither words nor action, we stood in silence for several minutes. The ranger, tired of doing nothing, turned away from the sight I was deeply wrapped up in.

"There are some things not even a camera can capture and do justice," I finally answered, the words sounding like a thinly veiled excuse.

The ranger shrugged. "I see this place every day," she replied. "I guess you city folk don't get out much."

"You'll never see this valley the way I have," I answered, smiling at her words. "By the way, I've taken enough photos to last me a hundred articles. Let's get out of here."

With a relieved nod my guide began heading in the opposite direction with me close behind. As I turned, a rustling near me caught my attention. Out of the corner of my eye a flash of red and dark gray disappeared.

We are Rats of N.I.M.H. We live and die on our terms, not theirs...

A SECRET OF N.I.M.H. Fanfic by Daphne Lage

My heart skipped but I showed no outward reaction. Looking over to make sure the ranger was far enough away I raised my hands to my lips. Kissing my fingertips I waved my hand in the direction of the blur in the trees. Despite everything I dared not imagine what I thought I saw.

You were right, Anna. We don't have to be afraid. Not anymore...

"Not anymore," I whispered to the wind as I turned to follow the ranger. "Not anymore."

THE END

