

You stared down into the eyes of the jackalope, and you tried—you really tried—to do as your instructor said, to still your heart and do what must be done to advance human (and demihuman) knowledge. To hesitate was to fail, and even in NATURE, sacrifice was necessary to survive and to progress. Both rabbits and deer—and presumably jackalopes as well—were prey species. They were born in droves, and had to die in droves, or destroy their ecosystems. To feed a creature like Muffins, prey HAD to be predated upon. It was the order of things!

(...And yet. AND YET.)

The jackalope shivered, unable to move, to bolt, pinned in place as if paralyzed and yet unable to die. Your eyes drifted to the cutting tools and forceps provided.

(...And yet, THIS was not natural. This was a horror born in the human heart, a product of the mage's mind.)

You had planned to make and care for chimeras, hadn't you? It was why you studied those arts... But you had also studied medical magic. Your ambition, fresh and ephemeral as it still was, saw you as a sort of warden for the strange things of nature and of the wilds.

(Its eyes reminded you of Muffins' goat-eyes...)

"Hey, are you alright?"

You looked up at Logan Pearce—your partner in this class, as in most Life Magic disciplines, for this was still one of his stronger subjects even if he did not fill his list with healing and restoration spells. His expression told you all you needed to know about your own. You took a deep breath, steeled yourself, and nodded.

"I'm fine," you asserted.

It was lie. An obvious one, too. Pearce took no comfort in it, and watched you closely. An idea sprung up in your mind, though—something devious, and dangerous, and more than a little desperate. If vivisectioning the jackalope—leaving it alive during the analysis itself—then what would prove GREATER mastery of life magic than keeping it alive, actually RESTORING it to life? And if you were to make a chimera of a deer and rabbit... Well, what if you could take JUST ENOUGH material from the one to transform the other, without killing either of them?

"Tips, come on," Pearce pleaded with you in a whisper, as you set to your grisly work, already expending precious mystical energies to keep your primary subject calm through the procedure. "This is just going to blow back on... And it's not going to save all the other pairs of rabbits and deer."

“If I can prove it can be done,” you said through gritted teeth, focusing upon the difficult work at hand, sweating with the exertion and the pressure and with the precision necessary to pull this stunt off, “no more animals will have to die in experiments, AND I’ll be a legend.”

You flashed your best friend a brittle smile, and your eyes filled with tears, but you willed them to stay put. None left your eyes, or spilled down your cheeks.

“Have a little faith, huh?”

Your mercy was not tender. Your good work was not clean. Blood caked fur, and washed its way up your hands. Bone and tendon were exposed, stretched, warped. Pearce moved with a frantic pace the sedate, unserious mountain of a young man was not usually prone to, facilitating your vain hope.

But in the end...

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...It was done. Hypnotized by your magic with nervous systems numb, one jackalope lay beside another. One was patchwork, its antlers outsized, its sharp little nails the beginnings of hooves, while a deer lay sprawled and breathing ardously before you, its own scalp opened up. The other, still split open with beating heart exposed, was the natural one.

“Good work,” your proctor said, surveying it. “Excellent, really. You are exceptional at this work.”

“Thank you,” Pearce said in your stead, because you were busy trying not to vomit.

“Now,” said the Mage Proctor, producing a wand, “we dispose of the materials.”

“No.”

Both he and Pearce looked at you. Your friend knew this was coming, but he hardly looked any more at ease for the forewarning. Your professor just looked cofnugd.

“What?”

“They don’t die,” you said, shaking your head, gulping back bile and—once more—steeling yourself.

“...I don’t know what you THINK you’re saying, or doing,” your proctor began, adjusting his glasses and again aiming his wand, “but it is not kindness to prolong the suffering of these beasts.”

“What about to <Cure> it, then?” you asked.

“Impossible!” he scoffed. “The damage already done... The extractions and modifications thus made...”

But you were already working your magic and, for all his assertions, the proctor stepped back and returned his wand to its place upon his belt as he watched you work. He’d seemed bemused, in truth—ready with a teachable lesson about accepting sacrifices, a pithy and professorial ‘I told you so’ queued up for deployment.

He never got the chance to use it, though.

It took everything you had—EVERYTHING—and something from deep down within that you didn’t know was even THERE... But you did it. Already flagging from the magical, physical, and psychological effort of the vivisection and chimericization, you focused your hidden and yet-untapped reserves upon mending the damage you had wrought. You began with long-suffering jackalope, stitching flesh and hide together with sparks of light, still its hammering heart with <Calm>, stroking its fur until the blood was all that remained of its terrible memory and inevitably-fatal flaying.

“That’s... That shouldn’t be possible at your level,” the proctor murmured.

“Holy shit,” said Pearce, simple and succinct.

Next came the other two—deer and rabbit both. The deer was easy—you’d taken as little material as possible. The little stag-in-waiting might not ever grow antlers, but then again might—with a bit more care, a follow-up procedure or two. The rabbit, who had most been added to and modified, not taken away from... Well, it still was no picnic, but with Pearce at your side once more, lending his magic and offering you vigor and strength, you reconciled its disparate parts and modified it into something workable—something that, at least for a time, could live, and function, just as any other animal.

When your work was done, you could hardly stand—hardly even stay away. You think your proctor said something to you, but you were in no state to hear it. Your admonishments could wait, you reasoned. Only Logan Pearce’s firm hands and strong arms kept you from toppling over and requiring a <Cure Wounds> of your own, and while the mutterings and murmurings of those in the operating theatre continued to flutter unintelligibly around your dull and unhearing ears, he hauled you—eventually CARRIED you, in fact—to the hall outside...

...Where you finally lost your lunch, and cried, and emptied yourself. Pearce patted your back all the while, saying nothing, just staying with you until you calmed.

“What the fuck, Tips?” he finally asked.

“I... I don’t know,” you admitted. “I just couldn’t do it.”

“What do you MEAN?” he balked. “You DID it. You did it and THEN some. What I want to know is WHY?”

“It was wrong,” you said, quietly. “It IS wrong. That... This isn’t the way.”

Pearce stared at you, brow furrowed, lips pursed. He looked like eh wanted to lecture you, but like he wasn’t even sure what for.

“...You must think I’m a pretty big weirdo, too, huh?” you noted, wiping your mouth off.

“Yeah,” you agreed, but then gave your shoulder a squeeze. “But come on, what else is new?”

You shared a long silence, and a smile.

“Anyway,” he said, producing a rather stunned and confused looking jackalope—or actually, upon closer inspection, the rabbit-deer chimera—from his robes with casual sleight-of-hand you hadn’t thought the big boy capable of, “what do I do with THIS thing?”

You stared, and your smiles turned to laughter.