

Xyla2 Experiments

By: C. Lee McKenzie

I'm Ardo. I used to be a perfect turtle. I had this fabulously wrinkled neck and, my pals said, an adorable tail. My pace was *adagio*. If you don't know, that means measured and slow. See? A perfect turtle.

Then one day while I was on my warm flat rock sunning by my favorite pond, something with hard steely fingers grabbed me. It slammed me into a dark box and zoomed away so fast I rolled up inside my shell like a tennis ball. When the thing lifted me out of the box, I was in a bright room and these round faceless pods with stainless steel skin hovered over me. I ducked inside my shell again.

"Xxuuuyt qgrt yyy!" One of the pods shouted.

"Nope. I'm not coming out."

"Rwees nkot, Ardo."

I didn't care what they promised. I was not budging.

"*Gwnok*," one of them said in a coaxing voice.

I love *Gwnok*. On earth it's called small delicious bug. I poked my head out and, sure enough, *Gwnok*. Maybe this place wouldn't be so bad.

Big mistake.

They didn't hurt me, but they embarrassed me a bit, and after I came out of my shell, I was not the same.

My legs started to grow—not the front ones, just the two in the back. My adorable tail disappeared along with my shell. I was shocked. Turtles don't look all that great de-shelled.

I discovered that the Podlings were from planet Xlya₂. They were doing experiments—that word still makes me shudder—on earth animals. I explained I was a technically not an animal, but a turtle—*tsyxxl* in Podling.

"Get a horse or a cow, not me," I said, but they wouldn't listen.

Soon I had legs of a marathon runner. I was doing laps on planet Xlya₂ for something—I never found out what—and then one day I wasn't alone.

Garron arrived first. He started as a sleek alley cat, but after some time with the Podlings, his body puffed up like a balloon. When they set him in a deep pool of water to see how long he'd float, he sank straight away. He tried to tell them cats weren't designed to float, but they came up with another idea. Once he was fitted with a life vest, he'd float most of day with his feet sticking up in the air.

"I hate this," he'd yell, but the Podlings ignored him and kept making data entries on their digital clipboards.

Sylvanna arrived later. As a snake, she wasn't bad, but boy did she make a fuss when she sprouted not one, not two, but six feet. The Podlings gave her shoes that sparkled, and that went a long way to calming her down while she walked on a treadmill.

We all wanted to escape, and since I was the only Podling speaker—I've always been good at languages—Garron and Sylvanna sent me to the Podling conference room to plead our case. I overheard something in Podling that froze my turtle heart. If we didn't escape by the end of the Xyla₂ new moon phase, we would never be able to return to our normal selves. In fact, the Podlings were about through with us. They were already discussing their next visit to earth to find other creatures to replace us. In Podling, creatures are called *blxtto*.

I backed away from the conference room entrance and ran as fast as my super-ridiculously long legs would go.

Garron and Sylvanna met me at the laboratory door.

"Ssso?" Sylvanna hadn't lost her hissy voice. "What did they sssay?"

I shook my head. “They said *vwot* again.” I couldn’t tell her that in a few days she’d never be able to lose those feet and slither again, that she’d always be a *hymtx* here on this strange planet.

Garron waddled into his corner and sat staring at the walls.

“I’m going on *ssstrike*.” Sylvanna stomped into her sleeping area and did her best to coil, but her shoes got in the way.

“Strike?” I asked. “You mean I should refuse to be a running *tsyyxl*?”

Garron returned from his corner. “No more floating—” He looked at me. “What am I?”

“You’re a *qtyl*.”

From her area, Sylvanna shouted, “And I’m not going to be a tread-milling *hymtx* any more either.” Two pair of shoes flew at us and landed on the floor as the Podlings arrived.

The three of us stuck together. We stretched out side-by-side on the hard floor and refused to move. The Podlings huddled around us.

“Xwwwop.”

“Trrfkdp.”

They were not happy and they spoke fast with a hard whirring tone in their voices.

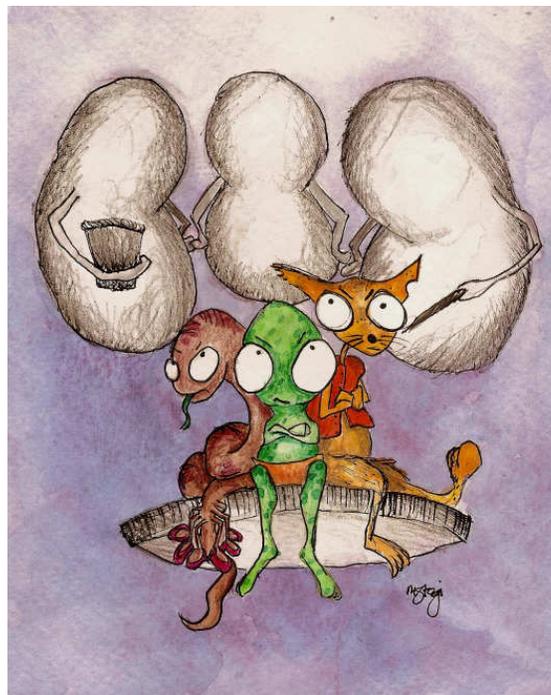
“What did they *sssay*?” Sylvanna hissed.

“I’m not sure.”

I wished they had faces. Sometimes expressions help me understand foreign words when I’m upset. Suddenly all the Podlings were talking at the same time, and I only caught a few words I could repeat in front of Sylvanna.

Then the wall slid open and the head Podling swooped in. “Ywxxop!”

We were in for it. I would have given a month of *Gwnok* if I’d had my shell to duck inside.



“Ardo.” The head Podling shouted my name. “Qxvoo dxyt.”

“Qxvoo dxyt?” I repeated, shocked.

The head Podling sped off, leaving us with the angry lab crew.

Garron nudged me. “What?”

“I think they’re letting us go. Something us about being too much trouble.”

They whisked us into the transport pod.

Zoom, zoom, zoom.

Phunk.

Earth.

“Home, at last,” we cheered.

Once we arrived, the changes started slowly, but sped up. My tail reappeared, then my rear legs shrank. It felt so good when my shell settled on my back. Garron became sleek and sly again, and then Sylvanna lost the last of her feet and had to give up her favorite shoes.

When we said goodbye we were a bit sad, but we promised to keep in touch, and if any Podlings

showed up again we would sound an alert.

So here I am by my pond, warming up my shell,

waiting for the wrinkles in my neck to return. Life is good, and—excuse me, I see Gwnok, and I'm hungry.

~The End~
