

THE EMPEROR'S NEW COAT



by Pooka G

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Special Thanks:

Beelzebjörn, Ian James Gray, Logan Rollins, Matthew Wilkins, and MagnificentLilyWitch for reading and giving feedback along the way

Brian Gray (urbanbohemian) for being a true-life proofreading champion in the Hour of Need

J. Paquette and **Aaron Rupchand-Kokotek** for cross-checking all the things I thought I made up about San Francisco

The residents of **LinParsLey Manor** for their encouragement, knowledge, and the best damn pancakes this side of the Gauntlet

There's also an **individual whose name I forget** whose selkie story on the old White Wolf forums sparked my love for the kith. I wish I could remember enough detail to offer proper thanks...

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Jackie Cassada & Nicky Rea, whose dreams helped awaken so many of ours.



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a selkie story for



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INTRODUCTION

There were once two rogues who came to the Emperor's palace, claiming that they knew how to make the most beautiful clothes, which were invisible to anyone who was dull or unintelligent. Being a man who thought very highly of himself, the Emperor hired them to make him a new outfit. Each day, the rogues pretended to continue weaving and assembling the suit of clothes, and none of the courtiers stopped them, for none wished to admit that they couldn't see the threads, and therefore be proven fools. At last the rogues said the suit was finished, and pretended to drape their invisible work around the Emperor's naked body. When he marched proudly through the streets, his subjects said nothing out of their own embarrassment and pride, until a boy piped up that the Emperor had not a stitch on him. Yet even though he had been fooled along with the rest of the city, the Emperor decided to continue on to the palace, embracing the truth that comes from the lips of a child.

At least, that is one way to tell the tale.

Another interpretation is that the story demonstrates the illusion of royalty. The Emperor in that moment of exposure was just a man, with nothing but his pride; there was nothing imperial about him, save that all the people present agreed that there was.

He was as foolish as they were, and yet he carried on being Emperor. Why should such a man, who only has power because people believe he should, be allowed to continue in his vanity?

There aren't so many emperors around nowadays. Royalty is often seen as something quaint or outdated, with monarchs serving as ceremonial figures more than temporal rulers—not always, but certainly more frequently than in the past. Yet ideas have a kind of inertia, and true change does not often happen overnight. The world may always need leaders, and it may always need figureheads, but with each passing century, there is a growing sense that such people need to earn and maintain their right to power. How they do that, and the way they use that power, depends on the position of the ones who elevate them. But in the end, everyone is equally naked underneath.

The tale in this book is not a version of that first one, nor does it directly engage with its story. It merely echoes it, and its subtle suggestion that we must all look more closely at power, and be honest with ourselves, and each other, about our own natures. And then in theory, when we can all see each other plainly, we can decide for ourselves what makes an Emperor or not.

How to Use This Book

This supplement is primarily intended for Storytellers, as a more-or-less ready-made story to place in their Changeling chronicle (or potentially start a new one). It's partly a send-up to some of the earliest Changeling supplements, the *Immortal Eyes* trilogy, partly an exploration on how the fae manage in the world twenty-five years later, and entirely a resource to be used to whatever degree is or is not needed—the Golden Rule is always supreme!

Chapter One: City of Mists and Dreams lays out the setting for the story: San Francisco and the Bay Area that surrounds it. This chapter gives an overview of the current fae politics of the region and some local highlights, but is not intended as an exhaustive “travel guide,” many of which are available online and elsewhere. Instead, there is more detail about the neighborhoods and landmarks specific to this book, which the Storyteller and players might need some deeper knowledge about. Both the Autumn cityscape and sites relevant to changelings are covered.

In **Chapter Two: The Children Told**, Storyteller characters are introduced. Players are still welcome to read this section; the information provided about these characters is common enough, and will enable them (and the ST) to roleplay more organic scenes. To those familiar with *The Toybox*, Changeling's first story supplement set in the city, or the *Immortal Eyes* series of novels that recount the tale of the oathmates who seek a gate to Arcadia, some of the names might ring a few bells. (General mechanical traits for the characters are assigned to the next chapter.)

Chapter Three: Anchorless upon the Ocean is where the players ought to leave off and let the Storyteller do their thing. The story has eight extended scenes and should probably be played over the course of three or four sessions. There is a fair amount of flexibility for the Storyteller to mess around with the narrative and add elements that they want, but it can also be followed more or less as it is. While this might not be the best adventure for a first-time Storyteller or group of players, it's not so complicated that only veterans will be able to follow it.

Finally, **Chapter Four: Flowers in Your Hair** is suitable for both players and Storytellers, and features a number of items for use in this story or another: bits of selkie magic, stranger chimerical denizens of San Francisco and local Inanimae, some mechanics to add more variety to Glamour, and inspirations from outside the World of Darkness.

Overall, this book should be a foundation for you to build your own stories. Don't worry too much about playing it “right” and just go with the flow...which, if there's any single lesson to be taken out of San Francisco in its iconic form, that might be it.

Themes

Remember, when the Emperor looks naked, the Emperor is naked.

—Daria Morgendorffer

And on that subject of flow...

This supplement is being released as part of the Storyteller Vault's *Year of the Tide* event, with “tide” being variously interpreted. The story developed partly to align with that point of inspiration, partly out of the pun of its title, and partly from a desire to create a tribute to the beginnings of Changeling: the Dreaming that kicked off the game line. Selkies have always been kind of on the edges, visible but not entirely developed like the nine “core” kiths, so it was about time they had a story all their own—and what fae could be more tidal than they are? Their natural habitat echoes their nature as changelings, caught between Glamour and Banality as they wax and wane, and their in-between-ness as skinchangers. This liminality gives them mystery, but also gives them potential to go in many different directions. They adapt, literally and figuratively, to the tides which are shifting rapidly indeed.

The theme of the nature of imperium engages with this one. Changeling: the Dreaming has always been a very sidhe-focused game, even if players don't always admit it, so this book must deal with them. Like the naked Emperors, the sidhe have maintained their position (in spite of all the ennobled commoners) because, it is said, they are the very dreams of rulership, embodied and empowered by the Dreaming. But those dreams have evolved, faster and faster, since the sidhe came to their nobility. The awakening of the selkie queen, Merala, during the *Immortal Eyes* quest, has shown to her people a new system of leadership—one which might appeal to many other Kithain. What happens when the dream of rulership turns democratic? The last thing anyone needs is yet another civil war, the sidhe least of all, so they must at some point come to terms with the changing nature of their power. Players and Storytellers should discuss carefully the balance of sidhe and commoners, especially selkies, they want in the game, because it may proceed very differently depending on the characters' allegiances.

There are other metaphorical tides moving in the Bay Area. Twenty-five years can change a metropolis quite a bit, and the San Francisco of this book is not the same as the one in *The Toybox*. Gentrification in the wake of the tech industry boom has forced many of the poorest citizens out to its margins, leaving the city mostly the province of the rich. Its reputation as a multicultural haven for dreamers is seriously threatened, despite the attempts to preserve that aura by both fortune seekers and true believers. Changelings, in particular, dance to their own tune, and often struggle to make ends meet. It's more difficult to do that for everyone, not only themselves, but also their Dreamers, who tend to be the artists and eccentrics and aged hippies that can no longer stay. The Glamour trickles away in their wake even as money pours in to make things ever glitzier. No Kithain in the Bay Area, but especially in San Francisco proper, has that far from their mind these days.

And then there are the literal tides. The weather patterns that have been intensifying worldwide are not absent from California and its central coast. The theme of climate change is perceptible to those who are looking for it, in the storms that crop up more frequently, or the threat of fire from the hills. It adds some urgency to the selkies' way of life most directly, as San Francisco is a coastal city at risk in the coming decades. It's



subtle, and not the main theme unless the Storyteller wishes, but similar to gentrification, it's always close by.

Finally, the ebb and flow of fae magic itself is something dealt with directly, as the flavors of Glamour and Banality help define some of the characters and their actions. No two dreams are alike, therefore no two particles of Glamour should be either. Kithain thrive on it, and starve for it, so some degree of **adaptability** is necessary to survive on it. Their necessary sensitivity to Glamour causes them to develop preferences for how they acquire it. In that very basic fact of changeling existence is the lesson that one must continue to change and grow as much as one can. They must balance not by standing completely still, but instead shifting bit by bit. Whether each one of them—including the players—follows that advice is entirely their choice.

Mood and Genre

The mood of the story is much more open to Storyteller fiat, of course; some tables like humorous games, some prefer horrific ones, and the Storyteller knows their players best. That being said, there is an aura of **discontent** that permeates this tale: commoners getting tired of maintaining the aging machinery of feudalism, nobles feeling threatened by the selkies establishing their own claims to nobility, individuals unhappy with their lots in life, and so forth. How will the players engage with that feeling in the air? They may laugh it off, or rebel against what they see as injustice, or uncover some of the darker truths that underlie the choices their fellows make... there are many possibilities. **Restlessness** seems to be part and parcel for Bay Area Kithain life, reflected by the uncertainty of the changing city, and in the complaining earth itself.

Yet there are also moments of **grandeur**—this is a story about Emperors, after all. The awe and splendor of the Dreaming is something that draws the fae like moths to a flame. Even if the

events of the story are comprehensible and can be followed, they touch on things greater than the characters' control, or possibly even their comprehension. Rulership, the shifting tides, the future of Kithain politics... one story can't fully encompass them. Like the appearances of the sidhe who attempt to dominate this story, as they do in so many stories, these concepts can be inspiring, but also overwhelming. Grandeur is not always beautiful, either; again, the Storyteller and players must negotiate how much they want that feeling of wonder to be beautiful and enchanting, and how much they want it to terrify.

As for the genre of the story, the primary driver is a **treasure hunt**: the characters are after the titular selkie Coat. But of course, it's never that simple. There is a dash of courtly high drama, as there so often is when the sidhe are involved, and the potential for some road trip adventure, if the Storyteller so chooses. And to the extent that every Changeling chronicle—or maybe every roleplaying campaign—is about personal growth, there are elements of this story type. If the Storyteller wants to strike a more epic tone, they are welcome to emphasize some of the classic tropes: obstacles, opportunities for the players to learn Something Important, mysterious figures who distribute wisdom, etc. In the end, it can be merely one episode in a larger tale about fae society and the direction in which the current of their history is carrying it.

All of that covers *how* to use this book, but in terms of *why* to use this book? Hopefully it will be a springboard for players and Storytellers, a post to which they can hitch their own story threads. It's one more piece that all are invited to integrate into their game worlds. Perhaps it will generate a bit of Glamour in the reader, perhaps not. Nevertheless, on the outside of any adventure tale is the experience of reading, which can sometimes be laden with discovery (self- or otherwise) itself. So, read on, and see what happens...